Rise of the Soul-Transferors

And the Tale of Shri Adi Shankaracharya

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1. *Her First Out-of-Body Experience*

The story of my birth is quite extraordinary. But then again, I must concede that my entire life was rather extraordinary.

Both my parents were Nambudiri Brahmins- the highest caste of all Hindus. They lived in a small house which was located a little away from the river Purna, in a village known as Sasalam. Their life was a pious one and they conformed to the religious practices which were expected from members of their caste. My parents were content in all respects, except that they were unable to have a child. The elders of the village advised them to go to the nearby Village of Vrishabhadripuram and pay obeisance to the idol of Lord Shiva at the Vadakkumnathan Temple. They complied and prayed at the temple non-stop for two whole days. When they came back home they were exhausted, yet satisfied, and fell asleep immediately.

As they slept, they were visited by Lord Shiva in their dreams, who told them "I am pleased by your devotion. I will grant you a boon: You may choose to have a child who will be dull but live a long life or a child who will be wise but will live for a short period only." My parents both replied that the decision was the Lord's to make since he knew what was best for them. Lord Shiva was pleased with their answer and blessed them with the latter. I was born at noon in the season of spring. My parents named me Shankara, which was also another name of Lord Shiva, and meant "the doer of good deeds".

"Inhale..." Sushma Shah instructed her seventh grade students. She was not experienced at yoga at all. She was, in actuality, just the music teacher of St. Bernard's High School which was situated in the district of Vile Parle at Mumbai. However, due to shortage in teaching staff, and because the Principal viewed all proponents of the fine arts and music as 'hippies' who had an inherent knowledge of yoga and other 'mumbo-jumbo', Sushma was given the assignment of teaching yoga. It was a subject nobody cared for, least of all the parents as they were only concerned with the subjects which had a bearing on the aggregate score in the final report card. They couldn't care less whether their child received an 'A' or 'D' grade in physical training, music, drawing or yoga, as these were the only grades that were never compared between the parents on parent-teacher day.

Upon the advice of her fellow teachers, she conducted the class on the open football ground, which was surrounded by trees on three sides and the school building on the west. She made the children face the east, in order to salute the rising sun. A little bit of online research taught her that 'meditation' was not the same as 'yoga', and was actually just a subset of it. Yoga also aimed at physical fitness, whereas meditation was only for mental health and for achieving self-realization. She browsed through the various *asanas* and positions, and the numerous benefits they had on the mind and body. Her research made her draw the conclusion that while yoga may have few benefits like giving peace of mind and increasing flexibility, it was, for the most part - poppycock. She decided to focus on conducting meditation, only because there were too many yoga *asanas*[1] and meditation only involved making the students breathe with their eyes

[1] Body postures.

closed and telling them to clear their minds. She was amused by the idea of having a class full of 'enlightened' students by the end of the year.

She made the students breathe in the ratio 1:4:8, i.e., if it takes two seconds to inhale, one must hold their breath for eight seconds and exhaling ought to take sixteen seconds. The class of forty-three students pretended to go along with her instructions. But they secretly kept their eyes open ever so slightly, that they appeared to be closed to the casual observer, but just open enough to see Sushma's feet through the tiny slits between their eye-lids. The moment she turned her back or passed by them, they would perform their own relaxation exercises, which in a co-educational school included, but was not limited to, slapping the head of the boy or girl seated in front of them (and pretending as if somebody else did it), shooting paper balls at comrades with the aid of a rubber band or a straw, and dancing in '*bhangra*'[2] style just to taunt the oblivious teacher.

One student, however, abstained from any tomfoolery. Aditi Mukherjee was in a deep meditative state. Initially she was intently listening to Sushma's voice, but slowly it began to deafen. Soon she was in a self-created, abstract bubble. It was a strange feeling. The world around her had disappeared, yet she was fully conscious of every aspect of it. She could no longer hear the trees in front of her rustling, nor could she feel the wind touching her body. Nonetheless, she was fully aware that there was a gentle breeze and that the trees were playing with the wind. At one moment a butterfly passed by in front of her. She didn't have to open her eyes to confirm it, she was

[2] Traditional Indian dancing style originating in Punjab.

certain that the butterfly flew by, despite none of her five senses providing her mind any indication of the incident.

Time lost all meaning and significance. Seconds could have passed by, or even hours. Her heightened awareness of surroundings did nothing to help measure the amount of time passed, although they ought to have provided reference points. It was perhaps not the case that she could not estimate the passage of time, but rather, that it was of no concern to her.

Then unfamiliar visions began passing through Aditi's mind. In these visions she saw scenes from the life of a little girl named Sushma Shah who grew up in a conservative family, received training in classical music, had an arranged marriage and was living a content life with her husband while also working as a part-time teacher. She was seeing each moment of Sushma's life from Sushma's point of view. She saw Sushma being bullied in school, her first kiss when she was in college, every rejection she faced by schools she applied to and also the time when she almost cheated on her husband but restrained herself at the last minute. She witnessed every event of Sushma's life right up to the moment she conducted the yoga class for the seventh-grade students. However, these visions did not appear in any discernible chronological order as they seemed to have been arranged from the most-emotional moments to the most mundane ones. The chronology of the events was being pieced together on their own as more and more memories seemed to accumulate. This process went on for so long that by the end Aditi knew every intricate detail of Sushma's life, including her passwords, diary entries and every piece of gossip she engaged in. Decades seemed to have passed by. Aditi almost forgot

who she was and began believing that she was this lady named Sushma Shah, and had only dreamt that she was a girl named Aditi.

After what felt to her like ages, the visions stopped and were replaced by darkness and silence. Then she heard the ominous voice of a woman echoing. "Aditi! Aditi!" it shouted. The echo grew louder and clearer. The darkness slowly disappeared and a vignette appeared before her. She was back in the yoga class, but the image before her confounded and shocked her. In front of her was not the one she knew as Sushma Ma'am, but herself! She was holding herself by the arms and violently shaking the seemingly lifeless figure of herself. The petite figure did not flinch. Its eyes were nearly closed, revealing only a sliver of her black eyes. Strands of her neck-length hair fell over her face as she was being shaken. The seemingly lifeless body still had its legs folded with hands on its knees.

On closer inspection, Aditi realized that the hands shaking the figure were not her own, but a woman's hands, with nails painted red and with green bangles resembling those which Sushma was wearing when she was conducting the yoga session. Aditi tried to look around, but was unable to do so. The body she was occupying was acting on its own accord and she was merely a spectator.

"Aditi, wake up!" came the woman's voice again, and this time Aditi realized that the voice originated from the body she was occupying, i.e. Sushma Ma'am's body. Aditi's own body began to loosen up by the vigorous shaking and after a few light slaps from Sushma, it fell on the floor. The other children huddled around her. Rajeev Pereira, the class monitor, ran towards the school building, in order to call for help. The first adult he found upon entering the building, was the secondary-school level math teacher - Venugopal Sir.

As soon as Venugopal Sir deciphered Rajeev's breathless ranting, they rushed back to the ground where Sushma was administering CPR to Aditi. Venugopal Sir pulled out his cell phone and proceeded to call an ambulance.

Aditi watched perplexedly at the vignette of her kissing herself, from Sushma's point of view. She had never kissed anyone before and what she was feeling at the moment was rather uncomfortable. She found nothing appealing about blowing air into somebody else's mouth.

It was at this moment that she realized that she was not only viewing the world from Sushma Ma'am's eyes, but that she was also capable of hearing, feeling, smelling and even tasting everything through Sushma's sensory organs. Although Aditi tried to concentrate on what was happening before her, a small part of her could not help but notice some peculiarities about the body she was presently hosting. The inside of Sushma's mouth tasted sour and was awfully moist. Her body's scent consisted of a mixture of sandalwood and marigold.

The ambulance soon arrived and the medics placed Aditi's body on a stretcher and carried her away. Aditi watched helplessly as her body was being taken away from her. She felt an unusual sensation, as though she was falling in a bottomless pit. The farther her body was being taken from Sushma, the worse she felt. She tried to run behind the medics, but Sushma's body refused to move and continued to remain in the same spot.

Sushma herself was feeling a sort of uneasiness and tingling, which she was unable to ignore despite the gravity of the events that were happening. She simply chalked up her uneasiness to shock and exhaustion from the incident.

Saliva poured out from Aditi's mouth and her seizures grew more uncontrollable. Aditi could see them loading the stretcher onto the ambulance. She did not know what would become of her body; but she knew that she could no longer stand being a mere spectator. She feared that if she didn't act now, then she might remain trapped in Sushma's body forever. She thought about her parents and her school mates, and after gathering all her focus, in a burst of emotion, she shouted "Wait!". Surely enough, the word echoed throughout the ground. Venugopal Sir who had accompanied the medics till the ambulance turned around to look for the source of the voice. That was the last thing Aditi saw, before she was engulfed by darkness and felt that she was being sucked out from existence.

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Aditi regained consciousness, almost immediately, in her own body. The ambulance had barely left the school premises. The medics were surprised, but continued to diagnose her. To avoid taking any chances with the girl's health and to avoid a potential lawsuit, they took the girl to Holy Cross Hospital at Santacruz, Mumbai.

Her parents, who were notified by the school authorities, came to visit her a few hours later. They found Aditi in a state of mild shock, but fine in all other respects. She was ecstatic to see that her workaholic parents had to leave their office in the middle of the day to ensure she was alright. She desperately wanted to tell them what actually transpired at the school ground, but feared that her parents, who were already disappointed by her constant day-dreaming and wild imagination, would deprive her of her TV privileges and outdoor sports time, if she confessed. She also did not want to further alienate

herself from her parents, who viewed her as quirky and naïve, even for a twelve-year-old.

After diagnosing Aditi, the doctor concluded that she had merely fainted due to a heat stroke and prescribed some vitamin supplements. She was allowed to go home since the doctor did not see any reason to keep her under observation.

At home, she was visited by her best friend and neighbour, Cyrus Bookwalla, who brought her some home-made sweet corn soup. Cyrus was a classic example of a grade-A nerd. He was a fan of science-fiction including 'The Lord of the Rings 'saga, the Star Wars movies and the Star Trek franchise. He was also the only boy Aditi had ever met to proudly claim that he played Dungeons & Dragons, although she wasn't sure who he played it with. His freckled fair skin and brunette hair just added to his nerdy persona and made him a regular target of the school bullies.

Aditi did not tell Cyrus about what she really experienced on the ground. She never mentioned the truth about the incident to anybody, and after a few years, the incident was almost forgotten in its entirety.

2. *His Greatest Tragedy*

I displayed early signs of being a prodigy. By the age of three I was able to memorize the Vedas and several religious Sanskrit texts. My father wanted to get my Upanayanam[3] *done when I turned five. But he passed away before the ceremony could be performed. My dutiful mother ensured that my father's wish was fulfilled.*

I began attending school, where my teacher and fellow pupils were impressed with my advanced knowledge. In just two years I became proficient in the Upanishads and Puranas as well. I was very curious to learn about the universe, life and God. I had already begun forming my own inferences based on the ancient texts that I had mastered.

One day, as I was taking a stroll in the playground of the school, I saw some of my colleagues placing a friendly wager on the number of seeds that a particular watermelon contained. I shouted from afar "The number of seeds in that watermelon is the same as the number of gods in the universe". My colleagues dismissed my remark as absurd. They cut open the watermelon to see who among them was right. To their utter shock and surprise, the watermelon contained only one seed.

An old man woke up gasping for air. He was surrounded by nothing but darkness and had absolutely no knowledge of how he came into the predicament. He tried to move, but was unable to do so. For a

[3] The rite of passage of a young Brahmin marking the start of his formal education on Hinduism.

moment, he contemplated whether he died and was now in some part of the after-life. *'Is this what Hell is, just like a perpetual state of paralysis?'* he thought to himself. But the man did not give up. Minutes passed. After a little bit of struggle, he was able to move his limbs a few inches at a time, albeit in a clumsy fashion. After a few more minutes of grappling, he was able to finally get up. Once his eyes had adapted to the darkness, he was able to make out that he was inside some sort of chawl. He crawled out and found himself on the sidewalk of a familiar road. The surroundings seemed familiar to him. There were no houses nearby, only trees. Apart from the incessant cawing of a crow, there was no other sound on the street.

At a distance, he saw a light. With no other sign of hope nearby, he began walking towards it when he suddenly felt a tug on his left leg. He was limping. The man cursorily examined his legs and was shocked by their dark complexion and feeble appearance. He quickly checked his hands and was horrified to find that they matched the legs in all respects. Finally, he touched his wrinkled face and was bewildered by its unfamiliar shape and texture. He was unable to recognize any of the features of his body. He stood there for a while, continually feeling his face and torso.

Suddenly, he began seeing visions. Visions of the life of a boy growing up on a sidewalk of Mumbai's Western Express Highway and being raised by his father. He was told that his mother had left him and his father when he was an infant. After his father passed away, this boy grew up to become an alcoholic. Fed up of being constantly hassled by cops, he left Mumbai and began sleeping on a sidewalk on the Mumbai-Nashik highway at the outskirts of the city. He would spend

the day begging for alms from the people eating at the nearby *dhabas*[4] or those refueling vehicles at the gas station. Then after his dinner, he would drink some cheap liquor till he passed out.

Once the visions ended, the man again examined his surroundings. He had no idea what was happening. The crow continued to caw louder than before. The man remembered his original objective. He once again began running to the light. If he were truly dead, then it was rather elementary that he ought to walk towards the light. As he was limping forward, he was able to make out that the light was coming from the headlights of a car. The car was twenty feet off the road and was pressed against a tree. Oddly, instead of thinking whether the people inside the car needed his help, he hoped the people inside would be able to help him.

As he got closer, he recognized the navy-blue sedan and stopped in his tracks for four seconds. Then he began running even faster. As he got closer, he managed to recognize the woman in the front passenger seat. He finally reached the sedan and through the window of the front passenger seat he began shaking the woman and frantically asked, "Pramila, are you okay?" At this moment, he noticed four things at the same time. Thefirst was that his voice was hoarse and alien. Second, did the woman have a wound on her forehead which corresponded to a crack on the windshield. Third, there was a six-year-old girl whose body was lying on the dashboard. Fourth, there was a man in the driver seat with his head on the steering wheel, with blood pouring out of his head. All of these were alarming, although to different degrees.

[4] Road side eateries.

He had no time to be perplexed. He put his hand in through the gap above the half-open window and opened the door from the inside. He felt the pulse of the woman. When he didn't feel anything, he put his hand on her torso to check for a heartbeat. There was no movement. He then reached out to pick up the girl. When he turned over her body, he noticed that her eyes were lifeless. He took her out of the car and held her tightly in his arms as he wailed.

After about a minute, he laid her body gently on the ground and proceeded to walk around the car, to get a clear view of the man at the driver's seat. From the back of the driver's head and his attire, he already knew who he was, but he had to be sure. He opened the door of the car and froze. Although he knew what to expect he was still taken aback by the sight before him. He opened the man's eyelids, and felt his pulse. This was the third person he found dead in the last two minutes. But the third one did not sadden him so much as it confused him. He went back to the woman and child, held them and stayed still in that position. His mind went completely blank.

Five minutes later, he saw a minivan in the distance. The man got scared and did not know what he should do. As the minivan stopped on the road, the man kissed the woman and child and ran into the forest. As three teenagers got out from the minivan to inspect the sedan that seemed to have crashed beside the road, the man peeped back one last time, and then continued to sprint deeper into the forest. Even from a distance, he could still hear the crow relentlessly.

3. *Her Usual Day*

My mother walked several kilometers every day to take a bath in the sacred Purna River. One hot summer day she went to the river as usual but did not return. In the afternoon, I went out to search for her and found that she had fainted on her way back. I tended to her wounds and nursed her back to health. The next day, I gathered five of my closest friends and we began digging from the northern banks of the river. In a few days we were able to successfully change the course of the river so that it passed right in front of my house.

My mother was able to take a bath in the holy river every morning with ease. As a rainbow appeared in the sky, I could hear the voice of Lord Krishna saying "I am moved by your love for your mother. The holy river shall maintain this new course and pass through your front garden for all time to come and shall be a symbol of the love that a dutiful child holds towards a mother."

The uncharacteristic turn in the river can be seen to this day, even after two millenia.

"Goa?" twenty-four-year-old Aditi reconfirmed over the phone, as she was fixing the bugs in Dhwani's code. Despite being only three cubicles away, Dhwani was using the office's private telephone network to convince Aditi to join the Goa trip that some of the younger coders in the office were planning. None of their superiors noticed this misuse of the phone network, since their voices were

drowned by the sounds of papers being printed, phones ringing and their colleagues babbling.

Initially, Dhwani would walk over to Aditi's cubicle, but this drew unwanted attention from all the wrong people, which made Aditi rather uncomfortable. Both of them were the only women in the office of 'Datasaurus', an IT company, which consisted of eighteen male and only two female engineers. Unlike Dhwani, Aditi was disturbed by the undignified stares and tried to wear the most unflattering attire she had, which was usually a boyfriend shirt and jeans. She even tied her black hair with its burgundy highlights into a bun, to avoid being sniffed by the peon while he would be keeping her cup of black coffee on her desk. Her sleek anti-glare glasses were a necessity while working for long hours in front of a screen, but gave her the false impression that they made her seem unattractive. In complete contrast, Dhwani Mehta would use the skewed sex ratio at the office to make a point – that what she wore and how she behaved was nobody else's business. She would come to the office wearing the most ridiculous and bright clothing she could think of just to see if any of the senior staff had the cojones to comment on her office attire, and she scowled at any man who dared to eye her the wrong way.

That particular day, she wore a fluorescent tie-front top with beige trousers. Nobody dared taunt her for her quirky dressing sense - at least not to her face.

Unbeknownst to both of them, the male dominated office of coders had divided themselves into 'Team Aditi' and 'Team Dhwani'. It was a team system that developed one day when both girls happened to be simultaneously absent and the guys, including the senior staff, took a poll. On that same day there was also a poll taken to speculate why

both girls were absent. Many of them voted that it was because they went shopping together but the speculation was that both of their cycles had synced and they had their time of the month simultaneously, and this won the most votes.

"Yes, Goa." Dhwani replied as she scrolled through hotel listings on her computer.

"No, thanks. You guys go ahead."

"Come on, you have to come, if you don't come, I'll be the only girl there."

"Exactly, why are you even going? It's going to be just the guys talking about guy stuff."

"Duh… because Karan is also coming" she whispered.

"Goa… it isn't exactly my kind of place. You know I'm not fond of beaches. And I don't even drink. What will I do when the rest of you are getting sloshed?"

"Ummm... you could start drinking."

"Not happening." Aditi declared, as she hit the spacebar as hard as possible.

"Dude, imagine being at the beach with Karan. You can tell he's been working out a lot these days and I want to see him in nothing but swimming trunks just once. His six-pack glimmering…"

"Okay, I can see where this conversation is going. Bye, Dhwani." Aditi slammed the phone. Not only was she feeling annoyed because of her office colleague, but she also suspected that the management was recording their phone conversations. Dhwani did not support this theory, since she believed that if it were true, her team-head would

have fired her years ago for the abusive remarks she passed about him when talking to Aditi.

Aditi finished fixing the entire code by 7.15 p.m. then took off her anti-glare glasses, packed her bag and left the office without bidding goodbye to anybody. Her house was only a ten-minute walk from her office, yet she was always anxious to leave before 7 p.m. You see, after sunset the gang of five rowdy teenagers parked their bikes near a cigarette shop that was on her route. Aditi never dared look them in the face. Since she always left the office before 8 p.m. all she had to suffer was catcalling, but after that she would be risking a lot more than just hearing sexual comments. One of Aditi's neighbours told her that while she was walking on that road one night, the leader of the gang flashed her.

Aditi bowed her head down and walked quickly as the boys whistled at her and called her a *maal*[5]. In few minutes she reached the dilapidated building 'Gupta Bhavan', which was situated in one of the shadiest parts of Gurugram (formerly known as Gurgaon). Her parents never understood why she chose to work and live in such an area, but Aditi was adamant that she would not take money from her family or use their contacts to secure a job.

She reached her two-bedroom apartment and found her flat-mate Nura Gafoor was sitting on the couch of the living room, in her t-shirt and shorts. She was watching a sermon of her spiritual guru, who went by the name 'Dharamguru', on her laptop. Aditi loathed Dharamguru. To her he was just another ostentatious godman with no real knowledge of scriptures, other than a few anecdotes from

[5] A derogatory term referring to a woman as a sexual object.

mythology which he quoted repeatedly to amuse his millions of followers.

"Hey!" The two women greeted each other simultaneously. Nura was working as a freelancing content writer, because of which she had the liberty of working from home. So, each and every weekday whenever Aditi would leave the house in the morning and come back in the evening, Nura would be on her laptop, sitting on the couch.

It had been almost seven months since Aditi moved into the house. Nura was already living there at that time. It was difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when their cohabitation upgraded to friendship. Perhaps it was five months ago when Aditi tended to Nura when she was suffering a panic attack for no apparent reason or it could have been two months ago when Nura began teaching Aditi how to drive. Whatever the precise moment was, they had without a doubt become each other's closest companions. Despite living in Gurugram for longer, Nura did not have any other friends in the area, nor did she ever take the effort to make any.

Although they had grown close, Aditi knew very little of Nura's background, except for the fact that she came from a conservative household and spent most of her childhood in Bangalore. She was pretty, in a homely sort of way. She had brown eyes and sparkling amber hair. Unlike Aditi, Nura was anything but shy. It was not uncommon for Aditi to wake up in the morning and find a man, and occasionally a woman eating breakfast with Nura, only to leave immediately thereafter, never to be seen again. However, throughout the time that Aditi knew her, she was never in a proper relationship.

Nura was also extremely intelligent. Although she had never taken an IQ test in her life, her online chess rating was around 2500, that too

without any formal training whatsoever. She brilliantly managed her work and her investments. Aditi always suspected that her networth was much higher than what she let on, and even tried to probe into it a few times. But Nura simply dodged the interrogation. Aditi was certain that she could afford to not only rent but buy an apartment in any of the metro cities and live there without a flatmate. Ultimately, Aditi concluded that Nura was the type of person who despite having abundance of wealth, chose to live a simple life. Apart from alcohol and clothes, her only major expenditure was the annual trips outside India, during whick she lavishly spent on hotels, business-class flights and gifts for Aditi.

Just like Dhwani, Nura too would always urge Aditi to come out of her comfort zone. Every weekend Nura would plan a new activity such as going to a club or singing karaoke. She was also the one who persuaded Aditi into getting the burgundy highlights on her hair. Recently, Nura had also nagged Aditi into joining her for her early morning yoga sessions which she practiced in the living room. Aditi had been doing it for a week, but found the *asanas* that Nura was teaching to be far too advanced for her.

Aditi went straight to her ten-feet by ten-feet room and threw her bag on her tiny study table. Despite the pink walls, the room was generally dull and only had four pieces of furniture - a single bed, a steel Godrej cupboard and a writing desk with a table-lamp on it. After changing into her grey tank top and pink 'Hello Kitty' pajamas, Aditi proceeded to the kitchen to prepare her dinner. Both Nura and Aditi were excellent cooks and perfectly capable of making a variety of Indian and Indo-Chinese dishes, but due to sheer laziness they usually prepared instant noodles for dinner.

She took her bowl of noodles and sat on the couch, next to Nura. She then went on to describe to Nura the entire events of her day, and also proceeded to give her a detailed description of Dhwani's "outfit of the day". It was a ritual they followed daily. Since Nura rarely left the house on weekdays and had never experienced 'office-life', she enjoyed experiencing an office-life vicariously through Aditi.

After dinner, Aditi went to her room and browsed through Netflix for twenty minutes looking for some Rom-Com which would put her to sleep. When she didn't find any good movie, she just decided to rewatch Bridget Jones diary. When the movie was done and she had all cried out, she glanced at her phone and found a text from her mother and her childhood friend, Cyrus Bookwalla. Cyrus and she had maintained contact with each other for several years via text messages and by tagging each other on social media posts and memes. They even spoke over the phone twice a year – on their respective birthdays. However, the two of them had not met each other in-person since the 12th grade. Cyrus went on to do his bachelors in law from a law school in Bangalore and his masters in criminal psychology from Brunel University in the United Kingdom. After that, he went on to secure a place in the chambers of Kishu Khatri, one of the top criminal lawyers in the country.

After replying to both messages Aditi contemplated watching another movie since she wasn't sleepy yet. She finally decided to make an effort to sleep since she had to wake up the next day at 6.30 in the morning. She had promised Nura that she would give yoga a try. Knowing that a single alarm wasn't enough to wake her up, Aditi set three alarms on her phone for 5.20 a.m., 5.25 a.m. and 5.30 a.m., and

then fell asleep. She had no idea that the events of the next morning would completely change her life.

4. *His Dilemma*

I drew the attention of rulers and scholars of nearby kingdoms, many of whom came to meet me and test my wisdom. Even the King who ruled over Kaladi, King Rajashekhara, paid a visit to my house. I engaged with all of them in spiritual discourse and they left pleased and impressed. One group of astrologers came to my house to examine my horoscope. They informed my mother and myself that I was to die at the age of either eight, sixteen or thirty-two.

My mother went into a state of depression, whereas, I came to the realization that it was time for me to go out into the world and seek enlightenment before my death.

I confessed to my mother that I wanted to become a Sanyasa (hermit). She wept uncontrollably and asked me who would take care of her if I were to leave the house. I reminded her that my death was in any case near and I would have to leave her eventually. I said to her "O Mother, after the rains, one sees a lot of bubbles on the surface of water. Some bubbles are attached to each other for some time. Afterwards, they disappear one by one, and merge with the water…. We are also like those bubbles. Our earthly forms are merely temporary. Eventually, we must all go back to the One."

My mother was impressed with my words. But what good is logic when trying to convince one's mother? She became very emotional and forbade me from becoming a Sanyasa. I did not oppose her decision, nor did I bear any resentment towards her. I knew that it was only because of her attachment to me that she

could not bear me leaving home. However, I did pray to God that she may change her mind, as I believed that divine intention must prevail over petty human emotions.

'*How did I get here?*' Robin thought to himself as he walked down the streets of Virar, a suburb located at the northern outskirts of Mumbai. There was no logical explanation for his predicament.

Until this point Robin Pinto had a pretty normal life. He was born and brought up in Pune. He moved to Kolkata (when it was Calcutta) in his early twenties to pursue his Masters in Science in Advanced Chemical Engineering. Through a mutual friend he was introduced to a beautiful woman named Pramila, who he ended up marrying four years ago. Around this time he also secured a government job at the National Chemical Laboratory in Mumbai and was even assigned a special project, but he quit last year due to certain differences he had with his superiors.

The couple gave birth to a daughter who they named Astrid. Initially, Pramila had quit her job to take care of Astrid, but when Robin became jobless, she decided to go back to work. Robin was a good house-husband and took care of everything from Astrid to household chores. Just to stay in touch with his field he gave chemistry tuition classes in the mornings to a group of four to six students inside his house.

Pramila's job was as Operations Head of AHB Buildcon Pvt. Ltd., a road construction company, and the same was very demanding. Above this, to make up for the lack of time Pramila was able to spend with Astrid and Robin, they always made the most of weekends. Almost every weekend involved a trip outside Mumbai city.

Robin had a life-long dream to retire early and spend the rest of his days reading, playing bridge with friends and taking long walks in the park. He thought he had gotten closer to that dream when he decided to stop working full time and became a part-time tuition teacher. After all, Pramila loved her work and the family lived a simple life, because of which they weren't worried about money. However, life never goes as planned.

The previous night, Robin and his family were on their way to a weekend getaway at a resort in Palghar.

"What's troubling you?" he asked Pramila in a whispered tone when they were two hours away from their resort. He didn't want to wake up his three-year-old daughter who was sleeping in the back seat of the car.

"Nothing. Why?" she asked while trying to intentionally avoid eye-contact with him.

"You are playing with your hair. You always play with your hair when you are nervous."

She sighed deeply. "It's nothing. Just a bit tired. I think I'll take a nap."

Robin was curious since he found her to be a bit off the entire weekend. But he didn't press too hard. His mind was occupied with something else as well. About an hour ago he had noticed that there was a black SUV that was driving about forty feet behind them. The SUV always maintained the same distance, even when he slowed down or sped up. For a moment he thought to himself *'Are they following us?'* but he quickly dismissed the idea as a figment of his imagination. Robin had a tendency to fantasize about things and his exceptional observation skills inflated his paranoia. The truth was a

mere thought of being tailed was fascinating to him. It made him feel like he was the main character in a spy movie.

At about 3.45 a.m. he noticed the SUV coming closer. There were no other vehicles in the vicinity. Robin gave way for the SUV to over-take them. That was the last thing he remembered before waking up inside the body of a beggar and having to pull his own wife and child's body out of the car. What was even more confusing was that his own body was also in the same car. This happened about nine hours ago, and Robin was still unable to make sense of the situation.

He was now walking towards the City of Dreams re-playing the events of the previous night in his mind. Robin observed the pedestrians passing by him. They were either intentionally ignoring him or viewing him with disgust. This feeling was very alien to him, but that was the least of his concerns. In the last nine hours he lost his entire family and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't even begin to comprehend how he woke up in someone else's body. More so, why was he able to see the other man's memories? The confusion was so overwhelming that Robin could barely grieve over the death of his wife and child.

While passing by a *golgappa*[6] stall, Robin suddenly felt dizzy and his entire body shook uncontrollably. The *golgappa* vendor saw the poor man trembling and asked "All okay?" When the disheveled man failed to respond, the sympathetic vendor requested the two customers he was serving to wait and walked towards Robin. As soon as the vendor touched Robin on his back, Robin was flooded with memories. The vendor's entire life was flashing before his eyes. When

[6] An Indian snack consisting of a deep-fried crisp crepe filled with a mixture of flavoured water.

the scenes ended, Robin found himself gaping at the man whose body he was possessing earlier. He examined the body he was in and found himself in a white dhoti. He was now in the body of the golgappa vendor. He turned around and saw the two customers with small plates in their hands waiting for their next serving of *golgappa*. Just then, the disheveled man stood up straight and was trying to comprehend where he was. Robin had to leave from there.

He turned to the customers, said "Serve yourselves" and briskly walked away. The customers didn't find it odd. They just assumed that the vendor fled the area because he saw an officer of the municipal corporation nearby and didn't want to be fined for running an unlicensed stall. They happily served themselves while the vendor continued moving away at a fast pace. The disheveled beggar continued to stand there, confused.

5. *Her Déjà Vu*

A few days after the discussion with my mother about me becoming a Sanyasa, a life-changing event occurred. When I was bathing in the river, I saw a crocodile in the water. I quickly caught the hanging branches of a nearby tree, and began climbing upward, but the crocodile sprang from the water and fastened its mouth to my leg with its sharp teeth.

I cried out for my mother, who came rushing out of the house. She could not believe the sight before her and panicked.

"O, Mother! Saving me is only in your hands now" I shouted. My mother was perplexed and enquired what she could do to rescue me. "Give me permission to become a Sanyasa," I pleaded, "If I totally change the path of my life, then it is nothing more than a form of re-birth. If I am re-born, then hopefully the problems of my present life will end and this crocodile will leave me." My mother did not find any logic in my statement and she chose to ignore it. Instead, she frantically began yelling for help. But there was none nearby.

"It is no use, Mother." I shouted, "Nobody can help me escape this situation but you. It may not work, but at least if you grant me permission to become a Sanyasa, then I will die as a Sanyasa, and will have some solace as I am being devoured."

"Very well, son. You have my permission." my mother yielded helplessly.

Without a moment's hesitation, I chanted the mantras to become a Sanyasa. I took Apath-Sanyasa (the adoption of Sanyasa when death is near) at once. As soon as I was done, the crocodile let go

of my leg and I survived the ordeal unscathed. My mother took me in her arms as I emerged from the water as a "nominal" Sanyasa. In order to formally become a Sanyasa I needed to find a Guru.

After the third alarm rang, Aditi forced herself to get off the bed and went to the living room. Nura was already there in her blue "superwoman" t-shirt and black yoga pants, stretching. Aditi subtly glared at her from the corner of her eyes as she went straight to the kitchen. She commenced the second-most sacred ritual of her morning – making her cup of coffee. The most sacred ritual was, of course, the drinking of the coffee. As she sipped her coffee, she re-entered the living room to join Nura.

"Good morning!" Nura beamed at her, "Today we are going to do some simple breathing exercises. Just for clearing the mind. So first sit in *padmasana*[7]."

Grudgingly, Aditi sat with her legs folded on the cold tiled floor, without saying a word.

"Close your eyes. Now relax all your muscles. And very slowly, Breathe in…. hold your breath …. and breathe out. Good. Now when I stop talking, I want you to clear your mind. Don't concentrate on your breathing. Thinking about breathing is still thinking. The objective is to try to clear your mind of all thoughts. Naturally, thoughts are going to keep popping up. The important thing is to not indulge in any of them. Just erase each thought as soon as it pops up."

Aditi followed the guidelines given to her. The first thought was about how cold and hard the floor was and that she ought to consider investing in a yoga mat if she was going to continue these early

[7] Lotus position. A cross-legged sitting meditation pose.

morning sessions. As instructed, she mentally swiped the thought aside. The next thought was of her father who had still not approved of an unmarried girl moving out of her parents' house. This too she managed to swipe, albeit with some difficulty. In this manner, Aditi began visualizing each thought as a display picture on a dating app, and kept swiping them towards the left. It then struck her that visualizing the thoughts as part of a dating app interface was also a thought, so she swiped that thought away as well. Then she realized that all the while the tune of 'Astronomia' was playing in the background of her subconscious and so she muted it.

After a few minutes, Aditi began experiencing an almost-familiar feeling. The sound of the wind and the wall-clock deafened, yet Aditi was aware of their movement. Without her knowing about it, she had reached a paradoxical state of being, where her mind was free from thought and awareness, yet she was conscious of everything in her vicinity, including the presence of Nura and the furniture that adorned the living room.

Unfamiliar visions passed before her mind's eye. This time they were visions of a brown-eyed girl who grew up in Bangalore, going to the local masjid every week, crying as her father beat her mother every day and ironically, not shedding a single tear during her mother's funeral. This girl stole about Rs. 50,000 from her father's cupboard and ran away from his house at the age of sixteen, after he refused to allow her to study any further. She moved to Gurugram where she did odd jobs and completed her education. She lived with a friend until she was able to earn enough to live in a working women's hostel. When her financial situation improved, she took up a place of her own. All

this while she read over three dozen self-help books to help her cope with her emotions.

As Aditi saw visions of Nura's life, a subconscious wave of sympathy for Nura hit Aditi. After what felt like ages, Aditi had her first conscious thought – to get up and embrace Nura. The memories she was seeing continued to flow in, but Aditi could not bear to see more. She gathered all her faculties in order to pull herself out of the deep and bizarre mental state she was in. With all her might, she tried to open her eyes, a bodily function which she had always taken for granted.

When she finally succeeded in opening her eyes, she had a *déjà vu*. She was seeing herself in front of her, eyes closed and was facing the ground. Her legs were still crossed but her hands drooped over her knees and her spine arched forward, as if her body was lifeless. She then began inspecting the body she was in, knowing fully well that it was Nura's. She tried to move her hands. There was some resistance. But she fought through it. She was determined to find out whether or not she was dreaming. When she was able to lift the hand and hold it up, inches away from her face, she studied every intricate detail of it. '*No dream can be so detailed*' she thought to herself. There was an uncontrollable tremor because of which she couldn't hold her hand up for too long. She let the hand fall back on Nura's thighs and pinched her legs. She felt the pain. Then she decided that she would reach for her own body and pinch it to see if she still felt the pain. But she was unable to even uncross Nura's legs. They were too stiff, as if they had fallen asleep. She tried to lift Nura's body off the ground using her hands, but she ended up falling sideways and hurting her shoulders.

Aditi gasped loudly as she was awakened back in her body. She panted heavily as she observed Nura lying on the ground right in front of her.

"Ow! What happened?" Nura asked as she lifted herself back into a sitting position. Aditi just stared at her. "I think I fell asleep while meditating." Nura chuckled embarrassingly "I don't know how-"

Nura had to stop mid-sentence. Aditi, who was still panting, had attacked her with a hug.

"Adi? Is everything okay?"

Aditi didn't reply for some time. She just hugged Nura tighter. In turn, Nura hugged her back, unsure of what was going on.

"Aditi, talk to me. Did something happen?"

"I'm sorry." Aditi blurted as her eyes began watering.

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"Sorry for everything you had to go through" Aditi was sobbing now

"Adi, I have no idea what you are talking about."

Aditi terminated the embrace, held Nura by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "I know now…. I… I know about your father. I know how he abused you and your mother. I know how you had to lie to your school teachers about the bruises on your face. I know he killed your mother. I know that you just packed your bags and ran away from his house when you were a teenager. I saw it all!"

Nura was lost for words "Wh-How did you-"

"I entered your body while we both were meditating. I was able to see some of your memories."

There was a long pause during which Nura tried to make sense of what Aditi had just said.

“Wait. Is this some joke? Did you get in touch with some of my childhood friends?”

“No.” said Aditi with a straight face as a single tear streamed down her face.

“Is this supposed to be a prank? If it is, it’s in very poor taste!”

“It would be of a poor taste if it were a prank but it isn’t.”

Nura stood up. She had lost all patience. “Look, I don’t know how you found out about my father but this isn’t funny.”

“I’m telling the truth Nura. Trust me. I entered your -”

“And what was that about my father killing my mom?” Nura interrupted, “My mom died by slipping on a wet floor at night and hitting her head on a granite kitchen platform.”

Aditi stared at her and, with a poker face, narrated the events that actually transpired that night “You weren’t completely asleep that night. You were so used to your parents' arguing that it had become like white noise to you. You were lying on the bed, when you heard a sudden ‘thud’ come from the kitchen followed by absolute silence. You ignored it and fell asleep, not understanding what had just happened. The next morning, neighbours had come to your house. Your mom was nowhere to be seen. Your father told you that there had been an accident – that your mother slipped and hit her head against the kitchen platform. But deep down you knew he was lying. You repressed the memory because your mind wouldn’t accept that your father killed her.”

Nura was speechless.

“It wasn’t a dream Nura, what you saw and heard that night was real. But your young mind just couldn’t fathom it.”

There was a long pause. An eerie silence filled the room as the two girls continued to stare at each other.

6. *His Visit*

I packed supplies for my trip. My mother was crying. She thought that this would be the last time she saw me. I told my mother that during her last moments, she should think of me and I would come to her. My mother recalled the circumstances which surrounded my birth and came to realize that my leaving home to become a Sanyasa was inevitable. She gave me her blessings.

I traveled for forty days, living on fruits from the forest and alms from people I encountered. They had never seen such a young Sanyasa before. Mothers who saw me with my shaven-head and orange robe felt pity thinking about what my own mother was going through.

Finally, I reached Omkareshwar by the river Narmada, where the great Yogi Govinda Bagavatpada was meditating in a cave for years. Outside the cave sat many old monks who had been waiting for years for Yogi Govinda to emerge. They said that if I wanted to pay my respects to Yogi Govinda I could only do so from the outside of the cave without entering it. I stood in front of the cave, kneeled and began praying.

"Who are you?" a deep voice came from inside the darkness of the cave. Yogi Govinda had sensed my presence. The three worded question was hard to answer. He clearly had no interest in merely knowing the name by which I was called. He wanted to know if I understood my own existence. I extemporaneously composed and recited a chant of ten verses. The over-simplified gist of it was that "All is encompassed in the Self".

Yogi Govinda was impressed. He stepped out of the cave. All the monks who had waited to see him for years hustled towards the mouth of the cave and bowed before him. He told me that at an auspicious date and time, he would formally accept me as a disciple and become my Guru.

Few days later, I was initiated into the highest order of Sanyasas by Guruji and was given the title of 'Sri'. I had finally become a pupil of the knowledgeable Guru.

"Bail denied." declared the Judge of the Sessions Court at Mumbai. Vishal Munshi and his lawyers stared at the judge with their jaws dropped. Munshi, the Chairman of Sparrow Group, had lived an extravagant lifestyle which led to him being given the name "The Lord of Luxury" by the Indian media. Because of his repeated features on 'Page 3' he was also the ideal brand ambassador for his company's beer and wine business. However, like the poison apple in Snow White's tale, Munshi's life only seemed attractive on the outside and was horrendously toxic on the inside. Munshi owed over 5000 crores rupees to over eight banks. There were already civil cases filed against his companies and himself. But this time he was facing charges of money laundering and financial fraud.

In the last few days, he had been facing the worst of luck. Five days ago, he learnt that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) was going to file a plea before the Session Court for his arrest. He paid off the top officers of the ED to stall filing of the plea for a few months. Then three days ago he found out that the ED went ahead and filed the case and even obtained a non-bailable warrant mandating Munshi's personal presence in the Court on the next date of hearing. When his people met the senior officers whom they were liaising with to ask

why the case had been filed despite Munshi paying them off to stay put, the officers claimed that they did not have any recollection of signing the papers sanctioning the filing of the case or of instructing their subordinates to expedite the filing of the case. Munshi had not heard anything more absurd. He vowed that he would make the life of each of those officers a living hell once he was in the clear.

The matter was posted before the Court that day. Munshi didn't take any chances. Through his people he paid off the Judge to ensure that the prayer for arrest would not be granted. To ensure that things didn't appear to be fixed, Munshi also engaged one of the country's top criminal counsels Mr. Kishu Khatri. Munshi attended the Court personally that day, in compliance with the warrant that had been issued.

First, the prosecution was heard, followed by Munshi's lawyers. To the shock of all those present in Court, the Judge directed that a warrant of arrest be issued. Munshi's lawyers quickly drew up a bail application and tendered it in court. Munshi got a second mini-heart-attack that day when even the bail application was refused. The entire ordeal was completed in 15 minutes. The lawyer for the prosecution could not believe that he had successfully taken down a goliath like Munshi.

Munshi entered the courtroom with his lawyers but he was leaving with the police. His lawyers told him not to worry and they would be filing an appeal in the High Court the very same day. However, it was already 5 p.m. on a Friday evening and even the lawyers knew that the appeal would not be heard till Monday morning. Munshi, who had vacationed all over the world, was now about to spend a vacation of three nights- all meals included, in the locker. The press waiting

outside the court premises were able to get great photos of a depressed and confused Vikram Munshi who was still wondering what made the ED officers and the Sessions Court Judge betray him.

Meanwhile, the Judge had retired back to his chambers. After sitting at his desk, he closed his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them, he had no recollection of what had happened in the last twenty minutes.

At the same time, on the bench outside his chamber, Aditi, who had been resting her head on Nura's shoulders, woke up. The two girls glanced at each other and grinned.

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The two girls entered their Gupta Bhavan apartment, exhausted from their trip. Their week-long Mumbai trip had drained them completely. Aditi dropped her duffle bag on the floor and plopped on the couch. Nura closed the door behind them and went straight to the washroom to freshen up.

It was only four months ago that the two girls were sitting in the same living room and had accidently discovered Aditi's abilities. After that day, the two of them collectively conducted multiple experiments before and after office hours and on weekends in order to explore the extent of Aditi's abilities. Initially, Aditi was able to enter Nura's body only one out of every four attempts. Once inside Nura's body she was able to perform basic movements like walking around and talking. It was very odd for Aditi to speak and hear Nura's voice. After weeks of practicing, Aditi was able to enter the meditative state that allowed her to enter Nura's body on every attempt. She was also able to

control Nura's body for up to ten minutes, before her consciousness was pulled back into her own body.

One day, when their landlord had come to the flat, the girls showed him the utmost hospitality. The landlord was pleasantly surprised. The over-friendliness of the girls began giving him ideas and he let his imagination run wild. While he was daydreaming, Aditi closed her eyes and tried to go into a meditative state. Next thing she knew, the landlord's entire boring and dull life flashed before her eyes in a matter of seconds. When it was over, she found herself in the landlord's body and saw her unconscious body sitting next to her. From the coy smile that appeared on the landlord's face, Nura knew that it was Aditi who was inside. Aditi walked around the room, while in the landlord's body, and chatted with Nura. After ten minutes she felt a tug and knew that the body she was in would push her out. Before that could happen, she left the flat and closed the door behind her. Aditi woke up in her own body and the landlord was left standing outside the flat, unsure of what happened and whether he had collected the rent or not.

The two girls pondered over the science of Aditi's powers and what was to be done with them. After a lot of discussion, the girls mutually decided that Aditi's 'God-given' abilities ought to be used to make the world a better place, and they would start by bringing down criminals, corrupt government officials and unethical corporations.

Aditi quit her job and practiced every day in order to master her ability of transferring her consciousness to another person's body, which Nura termed as 'transferance'. After four months of practice, Aditi was able to spend up to twenty minutes in another person's body before her consciousness would get pulled back into her own

body. In order to enter the body of another person, the target had to be within ten feet of Aditi. Furthermore, if Aditi went beyond a thirty feet radius from her own body, while she was in someone else's body, her consciousness would get pulled back into her own body immediately.

Nura spent days trying to figure out the perfect first target. She finally selected Vikram Munshi. The man and his company owed debts amounting to thousands of crores and he even had multiple accusations of sexual harassment made against him.

Choosing the target was the easier part. The troublesome part was planning how to get close enough to the target so that Aditi could enter his body. Munshi wasn't an easy man to go near. Then it struck Nura that Aditi didn't have to enter Munshi's body, but only those who were in a position to inflict justice upon him. After a few days of planning, they flew to Mumbai. The two girls had to make multiple visits to the building of the ED, where Nura had to take care of or hide Aditi's body in the corridors or washrooms of the building. Finally, once they got a criminal case filed against Munshi in the Court, all they had to do was get Aditi to enter the body of the Judge and pass judgement against Munshi. They returned home the same night.

When Nura returned from the washroom she switched on the TV to check the news. They were playing a video of Vikram Munshi being escorted out of the court premises by the police on loop. Under the red banner which read 'Breaking News' was a scroll which read 'Sessions Judge Order Praised by Public'. Aditi smiled at the irony while sub-consciously also thinking that she ought to bring down the corrupt judge someday as well. Her list of people remaining to be taken down was getting longer instead of shorter.

"Mission successful!" Nura declared triumphantly.

"Hmmm…" came the response from Aditi, whose face was pressed against the couch.

"Go to your room and sleep. Let's just relax and go for a movie tomorrow night. We've earned it."

Just then Aditi's phone buzzed, without opening her eyes she took the phone out of her pocket and unlocked the screen. She opened one eye to read the text message she had just got. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "Cyrus is coming to Delhi for some work next Friday. He wants to meet for dinner."

"Oh, a date? You know, I don't remember you ever going on a date for as long as I've known you."

She smiled weakly, "It is not a date."

"By the way, we were in Mumbai for a week, you could have just met him there."

"I didn't even tell my parents that I was in Mumbai, Nura. They would ask me a hundred questions. Besides, I don't want any suspicion regarding the Vikram Munshi incident to fall on us."

Nura smirked and sarcastically remarked "Oh, so you are worried that if people found out we were in Mumbai they will infer that you have the power to possess other people's bodies and that you used those powers to put Vikram Munshi behind bars?"

Aditi sniggered, shrugged her shoulders and remarked, "You never know."

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Aditi had accepted Cyrus' invitation to dinner. They planned to meet at a gastropub in South Delhi called '137, Hauz Khas', which was less

than an hour's drive away from Gurugram. That night, Aditi wore a black polka dot dress with matching black heels and took an Uber to Delhi. She reached the bar early and sat at a booth, waiting for Cyrus. Ten minutes later, Cyrus entered. Aditi had seen a few pictures of Cyrus on social media, but he appeared completely different in person. Aditi watched in awe as the six feet tall man in a silver suit and blue tie entered the bar. He had brunette hair and a full thick beard, which resembled a lion's mane. Aditi raised her hand as he looked around for her. Finally, their eyes met and Cyrus beamed at her. Aditi felt a tingle in her torso as Cyrus approached her. She stood up to receive a bear hug from Cyrus.

"Chikoo! It's been so long." he said as he released her.

"Chikoo?! Oh yea. Nobody has called me that in years."

"Really? Not even your parents?"

"Nope." she replied with dismay.

"Oh, that's surprising…. So, how's it going? What have you been up to?"

"Nothing much. In between jobs. Enjoying a forced sabbatical."

"You aren't working at Datasaurus anymore? How come?"

Aditi sighed "Long story and a boring one. Can we please not talk about it?"

"Yeah, yeah… You have changed so much." Cyrus remarked as his eyes wandered all over Aditi's body.

"So have you! The last time I saw you, you were this lanky teenager with acne all over his face. Look at you now. You obviously work out."

"Please." He waved his hand as if trying to shoo away an insect, "You are the one who looks fit. Do you go to the gym?"

"No, but I do some yoga and meditation."

When the waiter arrived to take their order, Cyrus ordered the BBQ Chicken Wings and a beer and Aditi ordered the Jalapeno Poppers and a fruit punch.

They reminisced about their school days and updated each other on their after-school lives.

"The UK was fun and I would have loved to work there. But you know how my parents are. They can't live without me. Parsi[8] parents just can't stand being away from their kids. So I had two options – either arrange for them to move to the UK or come back to India. The latter just seemed easier. Besides, if I had to live with them in the UK, then it would cease to be the UK."

Aditi chuckled.

"Well, that was expected." he said as he glanced at the TV at the opposite side of the room. She turned back to check what had taken his attention off her. Abhijeet Das, the loud news anchor of the news channel "Independent News" was on screen and talking to the viewers. Fortunately, the TV was on mute. The banner at the bottom read 'High Court Overturns Sessions Court Order Vikram Munshi Case'. Aditi had already heard the news just a few hours ago. Weeks of work had gone to waste. Munshi had got interim bail on the Monday after his arrest and on the coming Friday he even succeeded in overturning the Sessions Judge's order in appeal. She was

[8] Zoroastrian community in the Indian subcontinent.

disappointed by it, but Nura had persuaded her to try and not think about it during her dinner with Cyrus. The moment she saw Cyrus she had forgotten about it, but now that her attention was drawn to it, she once again felt despondent.

"You know my senior was the one appearing for him. That's why he sent me to handle this case in Delhi, because he was busy handling Munshi's appeal."

"Oh, that lawyer standing behind him is your senior?" she asked, as the video of Munshi and Kishu Khatri leaving the High Court was playing on TV. Aditi already knew the answer to the question. Nura and she had extensively researched Munshi's known associates and lawyers before they had left for Mumbai.

"Yeah. And let me tell you, Khatri isn't used to losing. He took out his frustration on my chamber-colleagues and me over the weekend. I faced the brunt of that and tonight when he'll be throwing a party for my colleagues, I'm not there to enjoy it, just my luck."

Aditi paused. She didn't want to offend Cyrus who she met after several years. But she was unable to control herself and blurted, "Doesn't Khatri feel any guilt? Having to appear for a guy like Munshi?"

"Come on. Munshi isn't a murderer. What harm would it do to let him out on bail?"

"What are you talking about? He's defrauded a lot of banks for thousands of crores. That's going to affect the economy and the general public as a whole. Why should he deserve to get out on bail?"

"The merits of a case aren't too important when deciding a bail application. What matters is whether there is a chance that he'll leave

India or interfere with the investigation by the ED or tamper with any potential evidence. And trust me, Munshi's being in jail isn't going to stop him from destroying documents or bribing and intimidating witnesses."

"But he could flee, maybe go into hiding or find a way to leave India."

"By that logic nobody should ever get bail. In any case he's got a kid here, he's not going to leave his kid here and fly away from the country. And a guy like him can't hide within India. At least not while maintaining the lifestyle he is used to. Even during the last weekend which he spent in jail he had more luxuries than you and I have at our homes. He used his money and influence to get a TV, an internet connection and even a masseuse." Cyrus leaned forward a bit, "And I use the term "masseuse" as a euphemism…"

"See, that's what I'm talking about. This guy is making a mockery of the system. He deserves to be punished."

"Off the record, I agree. But he needs to go to jail after a fair trial. The problem with the media trials these days is that they adjudge a person guilty and they repeat it so often that people, and sometimes even actual judges start believing it's true. It can even happen that a person accused of a crime doesn't know if they are innocent or guilty. About a year ago a colleague of mine was handling this *pro bono* case for a lady who was accused of running over a homeless family sleeping on the footpath with her car. She was driving under the influence of alcohol and then heard a bump and when she looked back, she saw them there. She got out of the car to check on them but they were dead. She called the police and turned herself in. Charges were framed against her. She wanted to plead 'guilty' but my friend prevailed over her and she pleaded 'not guilty'. After some more detailed investigation they

realized that the tire marks on the victims' clothes didn't match those of her car. They checked the footage from the street camera that was a little ahead of the scene of the incident to see which cars passed the crime scene prior to her. They noticed one particular car which was going at about 165 km/hr. From the license plate number, they tracked down the owner. When they examined his car they found traces of one of the victim's DNA on the tire. The lady who had herself confessed that she was guilty was actually innocent, well not of drunk driving, but at least of homicide."

The story had some effect on Aditi, she began thinking that had she taken over that lady's body and read her thoughts, it would have come to the conclusion that she was guilty. *'Reading the mind of an accused person may not be a conclusive way of determining whether she or he was innocent'* she thought.

"Similarly…" he continued, "there are so many people who falsely confess to crimes out of police pressure or confusion. If a person can be mistaken about his own innocence because of repeated accusations, then imagine the effect a media trial has on the general public. That's why you need hard evidence. I agree that in Munshi's case it seems pretty clear cut that he has been siphoning off the money that he and his companies have borrowed from banks. I also know for a fact that he's been paying off bureaucrats and police officials to evade the law. The reason why he is able to make a mockery of the system is because the system is flawed. But it's still the only one we have right now. If we start condemning people based on hearsay and what the media puts in our head, then all that remains is chaos. Also, it's not just important to do justice, people should actually feel that justice is being done. They should be reminded that there is a system in place which

is being followed and that the Court orders aren't like their McDonald's orders which they can get in 5 minutes. The judges give careful consideration before taking decisions which can have prejudicial consequences. Munshi will probably get what's coming to him but it will take time"

Cyrus' words made Aditi think that her method of getting people convicted was perhaps not as ingenious and full-proof as she thought.

"And to quote my boy Gandalf…" he continued with a mischievous simper "Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement."

Aditi let out a squeak of laughter. "Did you just quote Lord of the Rings? You haven't changed, have you? Still the same nerd you were in school. "

"Said the coder to the lawyer." He quipped. "Want some?" he asked while pushing his plate of chicken wings towards her.

"No. Vegetarian, remember?"

"Oh yeah, forgot. At least have a drink."

"Sorry I'm a teetotaler."

"Come on! Just one drink. I'm only here for one night. Tomorrow I'll be going back to Mumbai and who knows when I'll be back."

Aditi didn't like to drink alcohol. But there was something about Cyrus' voice and eyes that made her melt. After a little bit of convincing, she finally acquiesced. "Okay, a single drink!"

Cyrus hit the table with excitement and called for the waitress "Can we get some shots here?"

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The next morning Aditi woke up with a mild headache and a bitter taste in her mouth. Without opening her eyes, she reached out for the mobile phone on the study table next to her and saw that it was already 8 a.m. She wondered why none of the three morning alarms managed to wake her up. She sat up right on the bed and noticed that she didn't have any clothes on under the blanket. This was odd for Aditi since she never had the habit of sleeping in the nude. Unable to recollect the events of last night that transpired after her dinner with Cyrus, she picked herself up and put on her t-shirts and pajamas so that she could go ask Nura for help in filling in the blanks. She opened the bedroom door and froze. Before her were Nura and Cyrus sitting on the couch in the living room, eating cereal. Cyrus was wearing the same clothes he wore last night, but without the tie, and Nura was in her usual morning attire. They both smiled on seeing Aditi, although Nura's smile appeared to be more mischievous.

"Good morning!" They both chimed together.

Aditi subtly pinched her thigh. No, she was not dreaming. "Good morning." she replied.

After an awkward pause Nura stood up, "You know I'm done here, I'll let you guys talk." Nura told both of them "It was nice meeting you, Cyrus." She gives Aditi a smirk as she walks back to her room.

Aditi took a moment to learn how to use her legs and then walked towards the couch and sat next to Cyrus.

"Heyy, how's it going?" she asked, still unsure if she was dreaming.

"Good. You got a nice place here." he replied as he swallowed a spoonful of cereal.

Once again there was an awkward pause. Aditi had to break it by any means.

"Listen. What *exactly* happened last night?"

"Oh, you don't remember?"

She shook her head.

"That's a little insulting. But then again you did get pretty sloshed." He said with a grin.

"I was drunk?"

"Of course. I'm not surprised, you had five tequila shots."

"Are you serious? I don't remember anything after the first one …Did you and I….?"

He nodded. "Yup."

"Oh god." She buried her face in both her palms.

"That's even more insulting." He quipped.

"No, no." Aditi got defensive, as if she were on a trial. "It's not about you, Cyrus, it's just that… I mean I just didn't mean to…"

"If I told you what else happened last night, you might find the fact that we slept together less surprising."

'What else could have happened that night?' she thought

"You told me." He whispered.

"Told you… what?"

"What you and Nura are doing here."

She was stunned. How much had she actually revealed?

"What did I say?"

"About the whole possessing other people's body thing..."

A sinking feeling overcame Aditi, the likes of which she had never experienced before.

"You told me about how you guys bring down criminals using your ability to enter into someone else's body" he continued casually "You also told me that you were the one that made the Judge deny Munshi's bail." In complete contrast to his calm demeanor, there was a storm of anxiety brewing inside Aditi. She had to think fast.

"What? I said that? How silly of me." she chuckled. "I suppose I say anything when I'm sloshed."

"Yeah, I thought you were just making it up too... Until you gave me the demonstration."

Just seconds ago Aditi thought she could not possibly feel worse, and she was already proven wrong.

"Demonstration?" she asked, not wanting to know the answer.

"Yeah. You remember there was this hot chick in the navy-blue dress sitting on one of the bar stools? Well anyway, after you told me about your abilities and the entire operation that you guys are running here, I told you that I didn't believe you. So, you said you would prove it by possessing the body of that girl. I said 'Yeah, sure. Make her throw a drink at the sleazy bartender.' You agreed. Next thing I knew you rested your head on the table and one minute later guess what…. You did it." Cyrus chuckled.

"You should have seen the guy's face."

Seeing that Aditi was speechless, he continued "After that, you woke up and the girl didn't even know what happened. Before I could recover from the shock of your demonstration, you proposed we go to your house, and… I think you can fill in the rest."

He resumed eating his cereal blissfully while she tried to come into terms with the fact that there was no backing out.

"Listen, Cyrus…."

"Don't worry I won't tell anyone. But I want in."

"In?"

"I want to be a part of what you guys are doing here. Of course, I'm not planning to move to Gurugram, at least not any time soon. But I'll keep coming, either for other work or to meet with you." He paused. "You guys need me. You are a smart couple of girls but if you really want justice and if you aren't ready to resort to inflicting capital punishment on your own…" he paused to wait for some indication of resistance from Aditi but resumed when it wasn't forthcoming, "…. then you need my help to make sure that the Munshi incident doesn't repeat itself."

He waited for Aditi to process what he had just suggested.

"We thought about it… Nura and I." she muttered softly, "We thought about dealing out punishments without having to take recourse to the courts. We were controlling the judge's anyways so what difference did it make right? But then what would be the punishment that we could give? We couldn't start our own private prisons and even if we wanted to, how ethical would that be? And we both are clear that we don't want to kill any criminal no matter whatever felony he or she has committed."

"Why? For someone like Munshi I can still get it, but what about the ones who have done more heinous crimes? You have child-rapists and serial killers …"

"They will get justice in accordance with the law. I wouldn't have even interfered in Munshi's case if the Judge wasn't corrupt. If I start interfering with the justice system beyond that then where does it end? Then I'm just as bad as them. There have to be some rules that we impose upon ourselves." She took a long breath "With time we want to bring all of them down, the murderers and rapists – everyone, but only to an extent of exposing them while using my ability to read their minds. I have entered to collect all information and gather evidence. As long as that's done and there's a fair trial, I'm not going to interfere."

"Fair enough." Cyrus raises his hands, "I could debate about it, but I see where you are coming from. Let's do things your way and see how it goes… so, am I in?"

Aditi thought about it for a while before "Sure. I would love to have you on board. I think Nura and I would love your input."

"By the way you just said you could read minds?" he interrupted, "I didn't know that. So what other things about your abilities do I not know?"

Aditi sighed. There was no point in hiding anything anymore. "It's a bit complicated. Once I reach a meditative state, I can enter the body of anybody in proximity… which through various experiments we have been able to determine is a ten feet radius. As soon as I enter the other person's body, I am flooded with all of their memories, every

intricate detail... childhood incidents, net banking passwords – everything."

"Really? And what if the person doesn't know English or Hindi? How do you understand their thoughts?"

"Makes no difference, I only read memories. I can only see and hear what they saw and heard… so it doesn't make a difference if the person I'm possessing and I know a common language. I can't read people's intentions …Although I might be able to draw an inference based on their behavior in other situations that I find in their memories."

"Wow. How does all that information fit in your head?"

"I do get headaches if I enter multiple bodies back-to-back in a short period. I can only possess three different people during a day; after that I can't possess any person. Also, the memories fade eventually. After I am back in my own body, I forget intricate details such as passwords, and after a few days I have forgotten most memories of the other person except a few highlights... Anyways, like I was saying, it takes about five seconds to take in all those memories. Once that's done I can control the other person's body. If I stick within ten feet of my actual body… the one, I am in now… then I can be in the other body for about twenty minutes. But if I start walking away from it, that time reduces. So, the farther I go from my original body, the less time I can be in the other body."

"You mean it's inversely proportional?"

"Exactly! Anyways, once my time in a body is up, I get pushed back into my own body. Although at any time before that I can choose to go back to my own body if I want. So, the minimum time I have to be in

another body once I enter it is five seconds and the maximum time, I can spend in it is twenty minutes. But I think with practice I can bring that number up. When I started, I could barely be in another body for more than five minutes… practice got me this far."

Cyrus bent his head upward, as though trying to by heart and process all the rules enumerated. Then he nodded. "So, what happens to your actual body when you go to another one?"

"Goes into a kind of comatose state. It is still breathing, but it's unconscious. If someone pinched it, I wouldn't feel it, but would feel the after-effects once I re-entered my body."

"Okay. Then there's only one more thing I want to know."

"What's that?"

"How?" he shrugged his shoulders. "How is any of this possible? How are you doing this?"

This was a hard question for her to answer. "We don't know. Nura and I thought about it a lot. We even did an online search about it to see if there were stories of anybody else in history who could transfer their consciousness to another person. But we couldn't find anything of substance. Finally, we concluded there was no point in trying to understand it. We ought to just be grateful for it. That's when we started discussing how we could use the abilities to do some good. I mean we owe it to the people, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah… with great power comes great responsibility and all that spiel! I get it. But let me stop you there. I think you should try to learn more about your abilities. Go deeper into it. If you have been given these abilities for a purpose, it's also your duty to make sure

you keep sharpening them. And the only way to do that is by practicing and learning more about it."

"But we tried doing some research… we couldn't find anything about-"

"You tried searching for people who had the ability to transfer their 'consciousness'. But I don't think that's what's happening here. Don't you see what your abilities really are?"

She shook her head quietly.

"Chikoo, you aren't transferring your 'consciousness'. You are transferring your 'soul'."

She raised an eyebrow in skepticism. "We considered that…. I know that the 'transferance' itself doesn't make much sense…"

"Transferance?"

"Oh yeah... that's the name Nura gave the ability. To signify transferring of my consciousness to another…"

"You mean transferring your soul."

"As I was saying…. I know that the transferance itself doesn't make much sense. So it would be wrong of me to completely eliminate the possibility of transferring my soul. But assuming that it is my own soul that I'm transferring from my own body to another, how would that be able to explain how I carry my own memories with me? Memories are stored in the mind, not soul."

"Really? That's the part you find hard to swallow? Few months back even your so-called 'transferance' seemed impossible. Now that you know about it, you are finding the fact that the soul carrying memories with it is hard to believe?"

Aditi didn't have any retort. There was no point arguing with a lawyer. She bent her head in admission. "You are right. I'll do some more research."

"Good. Now that that's settled. We still have one more thing to discuss," He gave her a huge grin as he chomped on his cereal "about what happened between us last night."

The butterflies in Aditi's stomach which had subsided, had to reawaken. She thought the conversation about the transferance was the most uncomfortable conversation she would be having that day. Clearly, she was wrong.

7. *His Funeral*

For three years I sat at Guruji's feet, learning more and more about the nature of the universe. I had also learnt various meditation techniques. When I had become well-versed in Guruji's teachings he ordered me to travel far and wide and spread the knowledge that I had gained. I gladly obeyed.

I first traveled to Varanasi and began preaching 'The Universal Truth'. Many scholars tried to debate with me in public, in an attempt to disprove my interpretation of Vedic texts. I patiently heard them and they all conceded after listening to my logical reasoning.

One day, a young man from the southern parts of India named Sanandana arrived at Varanasi. He was looking for a Guru to take him under his wing. After "interviewing" Sanandana, I accepted him as a pupil. A few months later I formally initiated him as a Sanyasa. Five years ago I was in search of a Guru and now I have become one myself. I mused at the cyclic nature of human existence.

Robin thought he had an idea of what was going on. Ever since the incident that happened seventeen hours ago, he had been in three different bodies, first was the beggar then the *golgappa* vendor and now he was in the body of an accountant who was working in some electronics company. Both the times when he shifted from one body to another, he first felt sick and started shaking uncontrollably. Both times the body he was possessing, touched another body on its own

accord and he ended up in the latter. Each time this happened, he acquired the memories of the person he was possessing.

Although there was no logical explanation for what was going on, Robin zeroed in on the least illogical explanation, that a supreme power had allowed him to continue to live even after his death.

There was a Spanish soap opera he had watched in which a man who died found himself alive again in the body of another man. But this was not the reason why he didn't hesitate to conclude that there were some supernatural elements at play. Robin wasn't too religious but he was exceedingly spiritual. He didn't attend church too often, but he prayed almost every night. He said a small prayer every night thanking the Lord for the health and happiness of his family. He never asked the Lord for anything except to keep his family safe. The irony of the situation was not lost on him. *'Lord, indeed you work in mysterious ways. I prayed to keep my family safe and instead you took them away and gave me a second chance. But why?'*

'I have to act quickly. There is no telling how much time I have to do whatever it is that I am supposed to do' he thought to himself. There was no telling how much time he had in order to do whatever it was that he was supposed to do. Fortunately, he was now in the body of someone who had a smartphone and some cash with himself. He used the phone to book an Uber to take him back home. A lot of the distance was covered by just walking and it was now just a twenty-minute drive. He rested his head against the car window as he watched the tall and ugly 'Shamballa Mansion' in the distance. One knew that they were in Mumbai if they spotted the thirty-three storied, oddly shaped residence of shrewd business tycoon, Pesi Daruwala, which was lit up the entire night.

Despite having walked for almost seventeen hours, Robin barely felt tired. When he was in the previous bodies, his legs did begin hurting after a few hours of use. But as soon as he entered a new body the pain went away. Even the exhaustion would go each time he changed bodies, because of which he didn't even require a second of sleep the entire time.

When he reached his apartment building at Santa Cruz at 11.30 p.m. he felt as if he was coming back home after years. The building was ten stories high and housed twenty families. But the occupants of the building weren't very cordial with each other. Apart from his own neighbor - Mahima Deshpande and the chairman of the building's Society, Robin didn't know any other occupant of the building, despite living in it for over four years. Robin walked towards the gate, which had a huge sign above it bearing the building's name – 'Sakina Manzil'.

As he was entering the gate, Mishra – the night watchman whose twelve-hour shift hadn't ended yet, stopped him.

"Where do you have to go?"

"Apartment No. 401"

"Who do you have to see there?"

"Robin Pinto."

"I'm sorry to say that they are no more. They passed away on Saturday."

"Yes, I'm aware… their family sent me to pick something from the house."

"How will you get in? Do you have a key?"

Robin completely forgot about the key. Even if he were to pass the inept watchman, how would he enter his own house without a key? He patted his pockets a few times, and then pretended as if he had forgotten the key. He told Mishra that he would retrieve it and return later. *'What was the point of tipping the watchman during Diwali?'* he thought to himself as he walked away from the gate, out of Mishra's sight.

For the first time since the incident, Robin felt drowsy. He walked towards Juhu's Jogger's Park which was a few minutes away from his home. The Park was locked. He made sure the coast was clear and then climbed over the gate and entered the park. As he walked deeper into it, he recalled some of the precious moments he had there. Pramila and he came there when they were newlyweds. She would take walks there every day during her second and third trimester. He brought Astrid there in a stroller and she would admire the colourful butterflies with wonder.

The place seemed much gloomier now. Robin lied down on one of the benches and cried himself to sleep.

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"Hey, what are you doing here?"

Robin woke up startled. In front of him was a disgruntled security guard. Robin began feeling uneasy and it wasn't because of the unwelcome abruption in his sleep.

"Get out quickly, before I call the police." the guard barked. Just then Robin touched the guard and as he had expected, he was inside the guard- watching the man whose body he was in earlier. He walked away from there swiftly, before the man could ask any questions.

Robin spent hours either waiting at the gate or strolling through the park. There was nothing else to do, and he might as well stay in the park, so that the security guard didn't get fired for leaving his post. He began thinking about what was happening and he saw a pattern. He was in a body for eight to nine hours, until he was forced to switch to another body, which he was touching.

He also noticed that although the park was exactly the same way it always was, for some odd reason it felt different to Robin. Robin realized that by being in a different body, his sensory organs perceived things slightly differently than his original body. The differences were subtle. His sense of smell was weaker, but his eyesight was better. Even his skin was more sensitive to the cold air. Robin found it amusing. He had been in five bodies till now, but never did he get the chance to truly appreciate what the experience was like.

At about 3 p.m. he remembered that there was a newspaper vendor on the sidewalk just outside the park. Robin purchased one of the papers to see if anything about his family had been reported. Surely enough, on the fourth page there was a tiny article of 2 x 3 inches which read as follows:

*"**Couple and three-year-old Daughter found Dead in Car"***

On Saturday night a couple and their three-year-old daughter were found dead in a car off the MH SH 40 near Palghar. The three of them were in a fatal car accident and died immediately after their car skid off the road and collided with a tree. The cause for the accident is still unknown."

He hated how they used the word 'accident' twice in the same article. The word 'accident' conveniently implied that nobody was to blame. But this was far from the truth. After reading the article he flipped

through and saw the obituary page where there was a small column about his family, which was commissioned by Pramila's sister, Celine.

"SAD DEMISE"

With profound grief we inform you of the sad demise of Robin, Pramila and Astrid Pinto. May their souls rest in peace.

Fondly remembered by friends and family.

Memorial service on 3rd May at 3.30 p.m. at St. Anthony's Church"

Robin decided to attend his and his family's memorial service which was being held the very same day.

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Robin reached the church just a few minutes before the service was ending. The chapel was a small one, capable of seating only about fifty people. Fortunately, the turn-out was a little under that. He quietly sat at the back and examined the entire affair. He wondered whether the sparse crowd was owing to the peculiar timing that the event was scheduled on a Monday.

Near the pulpit were large photos of the three deceased with garlands around them. Robin was able to spot Celine in the first row, who wore a scowl on her face, as always. She was an interior designer living in Hyderabad. Robin never got along well with Celine. He found her to be a narcissist. Whenever she would visit their house, she threw around commands like a queen. She was already in Mumbai for some work since last week and was put up with her parents. Robin had pushed for the Palghar getaway plan, just to avoid having to spend time with her over the weekend

He noticed that some of his students and people he attended college with were also present. At the end of the service, the priest invited everyone to join the family of the deceased for high tea on the lawn adjacent to the church. The people stood up and proceeded like a herd of sheep to exit the chapel, and move to the lawn.

It was a grim affair as any memorial service ought to be. But it was far grimmer for Robin who had to see people crying over his own wife, child and self. He remembered the part of 'A Christmas Carol' when the ghost of 'Yet to Come' showed Scrooge what his funeral would look like. Robin was just lucky that he missed the funeral service, and was only able to attend the memorial service. He would not have been able to see his wife and child's corpses.

Robin proceeded outside along with everyone else. He studied the other attendees more and noticed that even Pramila's boss, the CEO of AHB Buildcon Pvt. Ltd., Mr. Krishnan, was there. Mr. Krishnan was offering his deepest condolences to Celine and Pramila's parents. Behind him was a line of other attendees who were also looking to get done with the formality of speaking with the grieving family, so that they could proceed to the snacks. Robin thought it would seem odd to stay there any longer and not speak to the family of the deceased, so he stood in line too.

When his turn came up he just expressed his condolences by bowing his head lightly. He wanted to avoid eye-contact with Pramila's parents, if at all possible. Unexpectedly, Pramila's father placed his hands on his shoulder, and Robin felt a wave of compassion. He looked up at Pramila's father and mother. Their faces were pale, as if they had lost a lot of blood. He always got along well with them. They had approved Pramila's marriage to him, despite him not having any

living family. They came over to play with Astrid about once a week. They readily lent money to his wife and him so that they could make the down payment on their one-bedroom apartment. Robin, who was orphaned at an early age, regarded Pramila's parents as his own. He wanted, so desperately, to talk to them as *'What can I say? "I'm Robin. I'm just in another body!" No, that would be futile. In any case, I don't want to confuse the shocked and grieving parents. There's only so much a couple of their age could bear.'*

Reluctantly, Robin walked away from them and proceeded towards the buffet table where hot beverages and some light snacks were being served. As he picked up a paper-plate, he checked out the other attendees. Some of the business persons, including Mr. Krishnan, were busy networking. The others were critiquing either the priest or snacks. This enraged Robin. But he could not say anything. He took solace in the fact that the majority of the attendees were maintaining a sober demeanor.

His eyes then fell on a young woman who was throwing her plate in the dustbin. It was his neighbour Mahima Deshpande. She was only a couple of years younger than Robin but wore an expression of perpetual depression that made her appear to be much older than she was. Her face had freckles, which on her plump face reminded one of a chipmunk.

She had moved into the building only about a year ago, but in that short time she had grown very close to the Pintos. On her first day, Robin and Pramila had helped her in carrying some of her bags from the elevator to her apartment. She had not hired movers since she did not bring any furniture with her. It was a rented apartment and she had decided to rent all her furniture from an online portal. In fact, if it

weren't for her yellow Labrador named "Dante" whom she liked to cuddle with on her bed and sofa, she probably would have settled with sleeping and sitting on the floor. She was a minimalist in all respects except for the fact that she had a large collection of books. Her bookshelf covered almost entirely one side of her living room.

From the day she moved in, she and Pramila would speak almost every day. They would exchange recipes, gossip about other tenants in the building and even discuss politics. Although Celine was Astrid's real godmother, Mahima acted more like it by taking care of Astrid when Robin and Pramila were at office. Even Astrid got along well with Mahima, which was surprising, since there were very few people she was comfortable with.

As Mahima picked up her purse and made her way towards the gate, it struck Robin that she had a spare key to his flat. He turned to look at his in-laws and all his friends who were mourning one last time. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he took it all in – all the grief, all the sorrow, all the love that the people surrounding him had displayed. Then he opened his eyes, threw away his plate and chased Mahima.

When he reached outside the gate, he saw her turning a corner. He began following her briskly. He wanted to run, but he also needed time to think. He needed to come up with a story - one that would also explain the security guard uniform he was wearing. He thought about it, and when he was finally close to her, he shouted, "Mahima?"

She turned behind and saw the lanky man rushing towards her.

"Are you Mahima?" he asked, panting.

"Yes. How can I help you?"

"I'm Ashok. I am the security guard at the National Chemical Laboratory. There were some work-related papers that had remained with Robin since his time working at the lab. The lab deputed me to pick them up. I was told that you have a spare key to their house?"

She didn't respond.

"I was wondering whether you would let me in so that I could collect the same."

She didn't reply quickly. She thought for a while as Robin panted, then inquired, "Who told you that I have the keys?"

"Pramila's sister did, just now when I was speaking to her."

"Did she not tell you that I have already given her the only copy of the keys that I had?"

Robin froze, his lie had been caught, "Oh, really? She must be confused, since she is still grieving and all. I'll go back and ask her for it. Thanks."

Robin began walking back to the church. After a few seconds he noticed that Mahima was following him.

"Is something the matter?"

"No. I just remembered that even I had to talk to Pramila about something." she responded nonchalantly.

He knew this was a lie. She would follow him till they reached Celine, and if he didn't ask Celine for the keys or if it was discovered that he had never asked Celine for the keys before, then she would expose him as a fraud. Since his earlier lie had failed him, he had to come up with a better one before they reached the church. Despite walking slowly, he was unable to come up with anything. The two of them

entered the church, and Celine was in their line of sight, less than a hundred meters away. It was at that point that Robin decided that there was no lie that had a good chance of working. He could ask Celine for the keys and if she acted as if she had never spoken to him before, he could deny it and say that she just forgot about it. But even this plan had a high chance of ending with the police being called. He wasn't afraid of being arrested, after all as per his estimate he would be switching bodies sometime soon. But he didn't want some innocent guy to end up in jail because of him. More importantly, he didn't want to cause any further distress to Pramila's parents by having the police called to the church.

He contemplated just running away. But the body he was in wasn't in great shape. The security guard was too weak and couldn't run too fast. Mahima, despite being a bit overweight because of a glandular problem, was extremely fit since she went jogging every morning. She even ran a half-marathon every year. Robin concluded that there was only one safe option and that was to come clean. He stopped walking, turned to her and said, "You moved into our building in December, 2015. Pramila and I helped you with your bags. You had three of them- a huge pink trolley back, a green haversack and brown leather suitcase. You told us that you were from Bangalore and had just taken up a job as Talent Acquisition specialist in Quatro Hotels at Colaba, which was a 'work from home' job. The three of us finished an entire bottle of Sula Wine that night…"

Mahima was listening, but her skepticism was evident. He continued, "One month back when Pramila wasn't home, you, me and Astrid went out to burst crackers. While we were talking Astrid touched a sparkler that you were holding. Her fingers got singed. I quickly took

her up and applied antiseptic and a cooling agent. You apologized profusely to me. I didn't tell Pramila about it. Later that night she noticed Astrid's fingers were burnt and asked me about it. Even then I told her it was my fault."

She stood there just staring at Robin, "Did Robin tell you this?"

Robin sighed. "I am Robin," he replied. Mahima glared at him.

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The weather had been pretty gloomy that day, the way it usually is during the monsoon season. It had turned dark and Mumbaikars were leaving their offices to get back home. The highways were jammed as they usually are between 6 to 8 p.m. Mumbai city never seems so alive as it does during rush-hour on a Monday night. At the train stations people were fighting with each other to get in, as if the train were taking them to paradise and anybody left behind would die in an apocalypse. Lines were beginning to form outside the popular clubs, and office colleagues were going out to pubs to forget about their daily drudgeries. Couples were seated throughout the entire stretch of Marine Drive, enjoying the ocean breeze and the sound of the waves hitting the tetrapods piled up along the C-shaped waterfront. Markets and malls which seemed dull during the day, livened up as families gathered to conduct their shopping.

Amidst the entire hustle-bustle of the city, in a small coffee-shop at Santa Cruz, sat Mahima and a man whose uniform had the words "SECURITY" written on the front pocket. After the man was done narrating the story of what transpired in the last two days, there wasn't much said. They both just looked each other in the eyes. Robin waited patiently as she processed the information. He was fortunate

that she was religious and was a firm believer in the supernatural. She had once told Robin and Pramila that she turned down a cheaper apartment, only because there were rumours that it was haunted. Even Mahima's bookshelf contained several books about the occult and the supernatural, covering subjects from alchemy and aliens to voodoo and Wicca. Robin could not have found a better person to whom he could divulge the truth.

"What's the name of my dog?" Mahima asked suddenly.

"Dante. He's a yellow Lab." he answered without a moment's hesitation.

She paused for a few seconds. She thought that the questions she asked were perhaps too easy. "What is my favourite colour?"

"Purple."

"What dish did Pramila and I prepare together last Sunday?"

"Chocolate Walnut Fudge."

At that point the man in front of her took sips of the coffee that the barista placed before him. And each time he took such sips, he let out a soft "Ahh…" sound. This was a sound Robin would make after every sip of a hot or cold beverage. Her body fell on the back of her seat as it dawned on her that the man before her was no fraud. After a prolonged silence she finally asked the question that he knew would eventually be coming his way, "How did this happen?"

"I have no idea. I just woke up in another person's body, and I've been switching bodies every eight to ten hours since."

Mahima took some time to register that sentence. There were too many things going through her head.

"But how do you…" before Mahima could finish her question, she noticed that Robin had put his hand on his chest and his limbs were vibrating profusely. A nearby barista noticed this and came over to Robin to ask if he was alright.

"Sir, are you –" Robin touched the arm of the barista, who stopped mid-sentence.

Mahima watched as the barista stared outside the window and the man, she was talking to behaved as if he just woke up from a long nap. The barista then looked her in the eyes and asserted, "We have to leave."

It took Mahima a while to figure out what was happening, but any other person in her place would have probably taken longer. She stood up and walked out with the barista. The girl who was working the counter called out to the barista, "Where are you going?" but it was too late. Meanwhile the security guard who was sitting at the table wondered how he had gotten there.

8. *Her and Chhota Raheem*

I wrote commentaries on various Hindu texts such as the Bhrama Sutras, the Upanishads and even the Bhagavad Gita. As I travelled from place-to-place preaching about the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism, more and more men asked me to take them as disciples. I happily accepted those who had a genuine inclination to know the Universal Truth.

I noticed that some of the disciples were getting jealous of Sanandana. They thought that I favoured him over the rest of them merely because he was my first disciple. This was far from the truth. I decided to give them an exhibition of his devotion.

One day while we were at Kasi, I requested Sanandana to cross the Ganga using a bridge that was a small walk away from us, and hang my wet clothes at the bank on the opposite side of the river, since it was sunnier there.

Once Sanandana reached the other side and began hanging the clothes I cried out in a loud voice, "O Sanandana, come at once!"

Sanandana thought I was in distress and began running towards the source of my voice. Not wanting to waste any time in going towards the bridge, he decided to run across the river itself! The force of the water was so strong that even an ox would be washed away. My other disciples shouted, warning him about the danger ahead of him. But Sanandana was completely oblivious to all of this. In his mind there was no river, there was only one thing – the call of his Guru.

When Sanandana stepped on the water, a miracle happened. He did not fall into the water. With each step that he took, a lotus sprung up and supported him. He crossed the entire river by stepping on these lotuses without even realizing it.

The moment Sanandana reached me I laughed and asked him how he managed to cross the river. He didn't even turn back to look at the river and rather plainly replied, "When you have called me then there is no question of me thinking 'how' I should come to you, I just know that I must. You only have to invoke me and give me your instructions. Simply call my name and I shall come, no matter what obstacles I have to cross."

The other disciples never again doubted Sanandana's devotion. That day, I gave Sanandana a new name - 'Padmapāda', which meant 'the lotus-footed'.

Chhota Raheem's cartel monopolized the cocaine trade in India. Sometimes he himself couldn't believe that he had set up such a big operation. As a teenager he had only committed a few petty thefts along with his small gang of comrades. Raheem loved and despised them at the same time. He enjoyed spending time with them, loitering around and finding new ways to pass the time. But a part of him also felt frustrated for wasting his time with those small-time losers. Raheem knew that he was meant for greater things. He associated himself with a local marijuana supplier and began selling pre-rolled joints outside a college at Patiala, Punjab, under the guise of being a tea seller. At the tea stall he kept a dirty jar of biscuits. Nobody ever expressed any interest to buy the biscuits which were riddled with fungi, just as Raheem intended. If anybody opened the glass jar, they would find that the biscuits were only on the outer layer of the jar, and

at the centre were rolled joints. If any of the students ordered a joint, Raheem would place the jar behind the stove, open it, retrieve a joint and hand it over. In case anybody watched from afar, they would think that Raheem was just handing over the student a biscuit. The joint would be given and the money would be taken with utmost discretion. Eventually, Raheem grew bored even of this business.

Through his supplier Raheem was introduced to Don Ibrahim.

"Working under me is tedious. Do you have the balls to take up that much responsibility?" Ibrahim asked him.

"If you have the balls to trust me with it, I have the balls to take it up," he replied.

Ibrahim liked Raheem's moxie and took him under his wing. Initially, Raheem wasn't aware of the entirety of Ibrahim's activities, he just knew that Ibrahim Bhai was a gangster who was feared even by the police. Ibrahim deputed Raheem to assist in the smaller activities such as forging government identification cards, stealing of cars and selling counterfeit stamp papers. Raheem learnt these businesses quickly and was even able to streamline them. Impressed with him, Ibrahim included him in the main business – production and sale of cocaine.

The sheer size of the operation astounded Raheem. Ibrahim Bhai had over a thousand men and women working under him. The amount of money coming in on a regular day was so much that three trustworthy women were deputed exclusively for counting the moolah. Raheem was introduced to concepts of money laundering and *hawala*[9]. Soon he

[9] A method of transferring black money.

was driving trucks around Punjab, which were filled up with eight parts hays, so that the two parts of cocaine were well-covered.

Ibrahim Bhai was a man with a definite set of principles. The foremost rule he had set to his dealers was - no selling to children. Occasionally, he would hear news of a dealer who broke the cardinal rule. In such cases, Raheem would accompany Ibrahim's men for the drive-by. It would be easier to kill the defaulting dealers at secluded places, but shooting them down on public streets in passing vehicles sent a message to all other dealers which wouldn't be possible with a silent assassination. Raheem was never given the chance to pull the trigger. Ibrahim Bhai did not want him to get his hands dirty. He did not have any child of his own and considered Raheem to be his own son, which led to Raheem being given the name 'Chhota Raheem'. Raheem never understood why Ibrahim Bhai compromised in his standard of living. He lived in an old, almost dilapidated, 2-storey house at the outskirts of Patiala. When Raheem inquired about it he responded, "What will I do living lavishly? I was born in a slum and now I live in a bungalow. That's enough progress for me. I have been to bigger and fancier houses and I don't find them cozy. They are basically fields surrounded by walls instead of fences. I don't see the point. I would rather just sleep in a park every night. Besides, I'm not interested in any kind of luxuries. I don't do this work for the money. I do it for power and respect. I came from the streets and now I'm one of the top hundred richest men in the country. Even if barely, anybody knows– I know about it, that's what matters." Raheem didn't get the logic. But he remained Ibrahim Bhai's obedient right-hand man. That is, until Ibrahim Bhai one day died due to food poisoning after eating some bad fish. Ibrahim Bhai's gang unanimously agreed that Raheem should be Ibrahim Bhai's successor. Of course, they probably wouldn't

have- had they known that the "food poisoning" was caused due to actual poison administered by Raheem himself. However, Ibrahim Bhai's underlings, who were enamored with the charismatic Raheem, never suspected a thing. That was the first and last time Raheem took a life with his own hands. That was twenty-five years ago. Since then, all his killings were done by his goons.

Chhota Raheem was now a fifty-eight-year-old business tycoon, with more money than he could ever dream of. He was featured on Forbes' list of India's top thirty entrepreneurs for single handedly setting up a multi-million-dollar cement company. Forbes estimated Raheem's own net worth to be around 350 million. However, they were completely oblivious that businessman that the world knew as 'Raheem Dhanani' had an alter ego which was 'Chhota Raheem' and that he was not only the 'King of Cement' but also the 'King of Cocaine', who had a net worth of several billions of dollars.

Following the saying 'Don't defecate where you eat', Raheem ensured that the centre of operations of the cocaine business remained in a small village at Punjab, several hundreds of kilometers away from the lavish mansion at Ellenabad in Haryana where he and his wife lived. The mansion had a garden stretching over two acres, along with an out-door and in-door swimming pool, a gym and even a bowling alley. Raheem would often spend his evenings sipping a glass of *Château Le Pin* at the balcony attached to the den on the third floor of the house which looked out onto his lush green farm-lands that stretched as far as the eye could see. One particular day his evening session at the balcony was disturbed by a knock on the hall door.

"Come in." Raheem shouted as he stepped into the den, which was a large room that had a colonial theme. There was minimal furniture - a

teapoy and a sofa in the middle of the room atop a crimson rug with a *Jaipuri* design on it, a study table at the side and a huge bookcase. The study table on it had an old-fashioned banker's table lamp with a green shade. There was no computer or modern appliance of any type in the room. Even the wall-lights were gas powered. All the furniture was oak-carved, which contrasted well with the cream-coloured walls.

His head of security, Shyamlal, entered along with three other security guards carrying an unconscious girl with them.

"What is the meaning of this?" Raheem demanded.

"Sir, we found this girl lying unconscious in the garden. Please tell us what we should do?"

"Why are you bothering me with this petty nonsense?! And why the hell did you bring her here, Shyamlal? Have you lost it?"

"Sir, should we call an ambulance?"

"Ambulance? For this trespasser? Why? Call the police instead, they'll take care of her. What else am I paying them for?" As Raheem yelled at his security guards, he lifted the girl's face to get a better look at her. She was pretty and the burgundy highlights on her black hair gave her a very distinct appearance.

"Bring her in and put her on the couch." He finally ordered.

The guards complied and placed the girl on a red couch at the centre of the hall.

"Now leave. I will deal with her." He told the guards. Raheem's wife was not at home that evening. He thought that he might as well have some fun with the intruder.

All the guards left except Shyamlal, who just stood next to the couch. He felt as though he had just woken up from a trance. Unbeknownst to both the men, the girl on the couch smiled for just a second and without opening her eyes she took one long breath after which her smile faded away.

Aditi, now in Raheem's body, chastised him "Shyamlal! What has gotten into you today? I said leave, now!"

Shyamlal gave back an expression of fear and confusion and scuttled out of the room.

"And wait outside the door and make sure nobody disturbs me!"

'I love it when a plan comes together.' Aditi thought to herself. She had successfully taken over Shyamlal's body and used it to bring her own body to Raheem. Then she quickly re-entered her own body for only a few seconds, after which she used transferance to take over Raheem. She had a limited window of fifteen minutes and had to act fast. There was no computer in the room, so she had no option but to use Raheem's own phone. She picked up the phone lying on the teapoy and unlocked it. She now had access to all of Raheem's knowledge. Aditi only had time for one email, but it was going to be an extremely detailed email. She started the mail by adding the email ids of the senior police inspectors of Punjab and Haryana and about a dozen journalists, which she had memorised by heart over the last two days. Then, in the body of the email she started listing details of all of Raheem's cocaine production plants, cash deposits and his primary dealers. Raheem also had two offshore accounts, the details of which were written in a little green diary that he kept in his safe deposit box at the bank. Naturally, there was no time for Aditi to recover the diary so she simply mentioned its location. Just when she was about to

finish the email, she began feeling light. Her time was almost up. She quickly hit 'Send' and put the mobile back on her table.

"Shyamlal!" she shouted.

Shyamlal opened the door. "Yes, sir ji?"

"Take this girl and drop her body outside the gate."

Shyamlal had no idea what was going on. He gawked at the girl lying unconscious on the couch. He had no idea of carrying this girl into the hall, yet the rest of the security staff had just confirmed that he had. He thought he was suffering from some kind of short-term memory loss.

"Shyamlal?"

"Yes, sir. I'll drop her outside right away." He picked up the girl in his arms and carried her outside, closing the door behind him. As Aditi's body was being carried further away, Raheem's body began vibrating uncontrollably. Once Aditi's soul exited his body, the tremors stopped and Raheem found himself standing in the middle of the hall. But there was no girl on the couch. He began thinking that he had just dreamt about his security guards bringing a girl to him. But to make sure, he decided to call Shyamlal. Before he could lift his phone off the table, he got a call from an unknown number.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Sir, what kind of email have you just sent!?" It was the voice of the Senior Inspector of Haryana police.

9. *His Unfinished Business*

One morning as I proceeded towards the banks of the Ganga to take my bath, I saw a Chandala (a person of low caste) approaching me from the opposite direction. He had four dogs with him and was walking as though he were intoxicated. Seeing no way to avoid him, I moved off the path so as to let him pass.

The Chandala noticed this and taunted me "O great Sanyasa! You preach non-dualism. You say that the soul and the universe are one and the same. But you try to avoid contact with me because I am impure? Is my body not made of the same elements as yours? Then why do you avoid contact with me? Why do you fear being in proximity of my body?"

I was speechless. I closed my eyes and bowed my head in shame. When I lifted my head and opened them again, the Chandala and his dogs were no longer around. I realized that it was Lord Vishnu who had taken the form of a Chandala in order to show me the error of my ways. After the incident I never again discriminated based on superficial aspects such as caste or creed. The entire affair humbled me greatly. Despite all the knowledge I had acquired, I still had a lot more to learn.

'*She can do better than him.*' Mishra, the night-watchman of Sakina Manzil, thought to himself as he watched Mahima and the barista she was with, entering the building. To members of Indian society, there was only one reason a young woman would bring a man to her apartment post 9 p.m.

Mahima opened the door of her apartment and was greeted by Dante who rushed towards her. Dante's barking stopped once he saw the man behind her who was wearing a red apron which carried the words 'The Coffee Junction' on them. Robin stood still. He knew that Dante was weary of strangers and prepared himself for some loud barking. To his utter surprise, Dante walked towards him and started sniffing his boots. Robin walked in slowly thinking that it was the smell of coffee emitting from him that had pacified Dante.

Mahima set her purse on the sofa. As Robin waited for permission to sit, he examined the room, which was exactly the same as he had last seen it, but still felt different. The plaster was peeling off the sky-blue walls. The room had a worn-out beige sofa at its centre and behind it was a dining table surrounded by four chairs. There was no TV in the room. Mahima never felt the need to watch TV. Instead, her sofa faced her massive bookshelf, next to which was an old-timey grandfather clock.

"Have a seat." she said. He duly complied and sat on the couch with her, and her purse was between them.

"So, what exactly is happening?"

"I told you, I don't know. I just woke up in another body, and have been switching ever since. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that whenever I possess a person, I see their entire life's memories."

Her eyes widened again. Robin had never before seen Mahima making the expressions she had made that night.

"Really? What are the memories of this waiter?"

"Nothing too interesting. Out of all of the bodies I've been in, he might be the least interesting. He's a bit of a pervert though. Tries to check

out the cashier girl at the Coffee Junction and even stalks her on social media. But apart from that he's just an average joe. He does his job, lives with his parents, watches movies with friends, and pleasures himself about ten times a week…"

Robin gaped as Mahima blushed.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know why I mentioned that. There really is nothing interesting about this guy." After a pause he continued, "By the way, he likes to be called a 'barista', not a waiter."

"Noted…" Mahima then turned her head towards her bookshelf as if remembering something, "You know, entering another body isn't unheard of."

"It isn't?!"

"No. Spirits entering the body of a living person are common. Usually, some type of ceremony has to be performed." Mahima stood up, walked towards the bookshelves and pulled out a small black book and started going through the pages. She came to the sofa and showed Robin a page which had the heading 'Chapter 6: Séances'. "A séance is the most common way to summon a spirit of a dead person and allow the spirit to possess a body. But your case is unique. Tell me, did you see any pentagrams nearby when you died?"

Robin didn't know how to respond to that question. "What do you think?" he asked her.

Mahima shrugged her shoulders, "Hey, it may sound ridiculous, but what's happening to you is ridiculous."

'She's got me there.' he thought to himself. "But I have never read or heard of anything that's similar to your case. Having to change bodies

every few hours. Being able to see the memories of the people you are possessing, that is quite unique." She continued flipping through the pages aimlessly, "Firstly, are you even sure that you died?"

"What do you mean? I told you I remember heading towards a tree."

"Yes, but are you sure you died?"

He took time to comprehend the question.

"You were about to hit a tree and then you found yourself in somebody else's body. It doesn't mean you died. It's possible that moments before your death, your soul acted instinctively and left your body."

Robin raised his eyebrows, "My soul?"

"Yes, your soul." She said slowly, "You see there are instances of souls being summoned from the other world. But that involves a ritual like a séance. But then you may ask how ghosts come into existence." Robin had no intention of asking such a question. He was just waiting for Mahima to finish her train of thought, which seemed to be leaping from one place to another. "Ghosts are an anomaly that exist due to a person having unfinished business which causes an emotional burden that makes it too heavy for the soul to travel to the after-life. Although ghosts usually are just drifting about, they do possess humans. That's why this book even has a chapter on exorcisms." She showed him the relevant chapter which contained an illustration of a woman lying on a bed with her limbs curled in an unusual fashion and surrounded by a priest and two other men holding her down. "It's possible that in that moment before your death, you felt that you subconsciously, or rather "spirit-consciously", had unfinished business and decided to stay back."

"Wait, but aren't ghosts supposed to be dead people? Why are you assuming that I never died at all and that my soul just left my body?"

"Because barely any time had passed." she said matter-of-factly, "Ghosts never show up and possess another body within seconds of dying. They usually show up days, months or years later. So while it's possible that you did die, I find it less likely. I think your soul left your body and entered another before you could die."

"I hear what you are saying Mahima. There's no refuting what I've seen with my own eyes…. Or rather what I've seen with the eyes of the people whose body I have possessed… but my understanding of a soul has always been different. How does my 'soul' have the ability to carry memories with it? Memories are stored in the mind. Then why do I remember everything from my life right from childhood to the moment of my death?"

"What you are saying defies almost every recorded instance in history of a soul possessing a body or ghost remaining on earth. There was an incident in the USA of a young boy who used to sleep in his late grandfather's room. One day, the boy claimed to be the grandfather and asserted facts which only the grandfather could have known. In such a case, it's clear that the grandfather possessed the boy. How is that possible if the boy did not possess the grandfather's memories? In fact, how could one tell if a body has been possessed by the soul of a deceased person, unless some memories of the deceased person are not narrated by the possessed person?" At this point Mahima took a deep breath, "In fact, even in Hindu texts, there is an example of an Indian sage, who through meditation is able to transfer his soul from his own body and enter the body of a dead King. The example doesn't really help you too much since it's the complete opposite of your case.

There, through conscious efforts, the sage was able to transfer his soul into the body of a dead person, whereas in your case, a dying or dead person's soul was unconsciously transferred into the body of an alive one. But in the case of that sage, even after entering the King's body the sage had all his original memories. So, a soul is capable of carrying memories with it. I have enough material in my personal library to prove that to you, if you are interested."

Robin was listening intently throughout. "But I don't have any unfinished business. Not that I can think of..."

"Maybe you have unfinished business, but aren't consciously aware of it, or maybe you aren't even aware of it at a subconscious level and your soul leaving your body was not because you consciously wanted to finish some job but was…." Mahima hesitated to say these next words because she knew the reaction that it would illicit from Robin, "…divine intervention."

"So, you agree that God wanted me to remain behind?"

"Well, not necessarily God… Maybe a grim reaper," Even Mahima felt where she was reaching. She had little faith in the direction she was going, "… or maybe some psychopomp…"

"Psycho – what?"

"Psychopomps. They are beings that carry souls to the other world. Different religions have different ideas about what they are really. Hindus believe they are deities like Tarakeshwara or Yamraj. Christians believe they are angels of death and Zoroastrians believe the deceased is guided to the after-life by a part of himself, which takes the form of a beautiful maiden. Psychopomps can take many

forms ranging from human-like beings to animals like dogs, mice or crows."

"Did you say crows?" Robin asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Nothing." Robin didn't think it was necessary to mention the crow that was cawing while perched atop one of the trees at the place where his car crashed. If he mentioned it to her then she would use that to come up with some other far-fetched theory. He had now lost interest in the seemingly senseless conversation, and was only listening to Mahima out of politeness.

Nonetheless, Mahima continued, "Crows, and birds in the crow family such as ravens, are known for being conduits between the world of the living and the after-life. Hence, there is Edgar Allen Poe's poem on the raven who had come from the underworld to torment the narrator. Even Hindus leave rice outside their house after a person in the house has passed away, as a sign of gratitude to the crow for carrying the soul of the deceased to the other side. Kind of like how the Greek put coins on the eyes of the dead as payment to the ferryman so that he would take their soul across the river Styx."

Robin yawned, which incited Mahima to check the grandfather clock and realize it was past midnight.

"Why don't you get some sleep tonight? I wish I still had the keys to your house so that I could let you in. But you'll have to make do on the couch. I hope that's okay."

"No worries. After everything that's happened, even the floor is fine."

Mahima went into her bedroom and returned with a pillow and a blanket, which she handed over to him." Well, goodnight. We'll continue this discussion in the morning."

"Good night." He wished her as he took off his apron.

As Mahima walked back towards the bedroom, she stopped, turned back, "Oh, and Robin."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry for your loss."

He nodded soberly. She retired to her room. He lied on the couch and stared at the patch on the ceiling that reflected the beam of light coming from the open window.

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There was nothing but complete darkness. Then a huge 'thud' was heard and the darkness was replaced with bright headlights. There was the sound of wheels screeching and a woman screaming.

Then there was the voice of a different woman. But this one wasn't screaming, instead she was beckoning someone to wake up. For one second Robin felt he was being sucked out of existence. When he opened his eyes, he saw Mahima. He remembered where he was. He was sitting up on the couch, breathing heavily, as if he had been running away from something. He was sweating through his shirt. It was at this moment, a very infinitesimal moment, that Robin felt relieved. For that small moment his heart had tricked him and he actually believed that he was dreaming. But before he could say anything, reality dawned on him. As he slowly recollected the memories of the last two days, he checked his hands and body. They

were not his. No, what Robin saw in his sleep was no dream, it was a memory.

"Are you okay?" Mahima asked. He took a moment to gather his senses and then nodded. She continued "I'll make you some coffee. Just relax. Or if you want, you can go back to sleep."

"No, Coffee sounds good."

She went into the kitchen and proceeded to boil the milk.

As Robin sat upright on the couch, something struck him. "It wasn't an accident." He shouted.

"What?" came back the response. Mahima rushed towards the doorway of the kitchen.

"It wasn't an accident. There was one SUV following us for a long time. When we were at a point of the road when no other vehicles were nearby, it dashed into our car. Then after it hit our car, it continued to go on its way."

"You mean that-"

"Someone was trying to kill us."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a clear look at the faces of the people in the car."

"Okay. But why would someone try to kill you?"

"I have no idea..." No sooner did Robin say the words, did it strike him that there was one thing he knew that was worth killing over. "Wait, Fotura!"

"What was that?"

"Fotura, it's a drug that my team at NCL was working on. Maybe someone didn't want me to leak information about it."

"What does it do?"

Robin hesitated. Although he felt as if his old life was behind him, he just could not bring himself to tell Mahima what Fotura did. "It doesn't matter," he muttered.

Mahima was slightly offended but didn't dwell on it. "Was it really something killing over?"

He looked her in the eyes "It was worth starting a war over."

As those words sunk in, Mahima tried to get back on topic, "So you have no idea who was in the SUV?"

"No."

"Seems like we found your unfinished business." She shrugged her shoulders.

10. *Her Night Out*

I travelled to Prayaga in order to debate with the Sanyasa Kumarila Bhatta who had been expounding 'Mimamsa' school of Hinduism that focused on performance of rituals.

Unfortunately, when I reached Kumarila, he was in the process of committing suicide by stepping in a fire kindled in a husk of paddy. You see, in order to negate the Buddhist schools of philosophy Kumarila needed to first study it extensively. Therefore, he became the pupil of a Buddhist monk, under a false identity. During one of the sermons, the Buddhist monk began ridiculing the Hindu Vedas. This infuriated Kumarila who argued with the monk. In the heat of the debate Kumarila made some strong remarks against the Buddhist way of life. He was expelled from the institution and spent the rest of his days spreading knowledge of the Vedas. But he always regretted the fact that he betrayed the man who had taken him as a pupil. Respect for one's Guru is a core value in Hinduism. For this reason, Kumarila decided to slowly burn himself to death as atonement for the sins he had committed against his Buddhist Guru.

Watching Kumarila burn in the fire was disturbing, but I had no intention of talking him out of it. I understood why he had taken the decision and respected him all the more for it. In order to take Kumarila's mind off the pain he was experiencing I began making my submissions. After listening to me speaking at length, Kumarila acknowledged that there were merits in my arguments

but stated that he was unable to go into an extensive debate with me.

From inside the flames Kumarila, whose body was burning severely said 'O Sanyasa! I am unable to acquiesce to your request and engage in a debate with you. However, you can go and seek my brother-in-law and greatest disciple - Mandana Misra. You will find him at Mahiṣmati. When you come across a home at whose gates there are a number of caged parrots narrating passages from the Vedas and posing philosophical questions about the universe, then you will know that you have reached Maṇḍana's home.'

I thanked Kumarila and out of respect I stayed there till he met his end.

After a lot of convincing, Nura finally managed to convince Aditi to go to the nightclub. Aditi didn't really have any option; she had promised Nura that they would go once they completed fifteen missions. There was no more putting it off. Aditi tried to look at the bright side which was that she could finally wear the glittery black and blue dress that Nura had forced her to purchase online.

"The Crimson Dog" was a new club in Hauz Khas, New Delhi. When they reached the location there was a short line outside the entrance. But it mostly consisted of stags and couples. Nura frequented the place often, and was friendly with the bouncer who stood at the entrance. The two girls managed to cut in front of the line and were let in. Aditi could hear people in the line protesting as they were entering, but she did not dare look back. She wasn't particularly fond of violating social protocols, but was too tired to protest against Nura's act.

The night club was just like any other – loud, dark and crowded. The DJ was playing Bollywood songs. Aditi didn't mind the Bollywood songs, but she did have a problem with the effect they had on the patrons. Other songs didn't have the ability to energize South Delhi carousers the way Bollywood ones did. They made the crowd louder and rowdier than usual.

"Thursday nights are Bollywood nights" Nura yelled to Aditi, as they tried to pass through the crowd and move towards the bar.

"Ah!" Aditi shouted back, but she didn't think Nura heard it. "Crowd seems a bit rowdy."

"Don't worry, I always carry a Taser and a pair of scissors in my clutch." She said as she lifted her clutch up.

"Tasers? And scissors?"

"Yeah, Dharamguru suggests that all women carry a taser and a sharp object… I would carry a knife, but it becomes harder to get past security in such places with a knife in your purse."

"What does your favourite Dharamguru say about frequenting nightclubs?"

"He's chilled about it. Dharamguru preaches that there are many different kinds of meditations. Sitting quietly in a room, planting trees, having sex, these can all be types of meditation as a long as you are living in the moment. You should read more about him. People who have misconceptions about him don't really know him well enough. He's very enlightened."

"Can Dharamguru use meditation to enter another person's body?" Aditi asked sarcastically to which Nura smirked.

Despite the deafening music the girls heard a shrill voice distinctly call out "Aditi!" from a distance.

The two girls turned and saw a girl with a bright orange spaghetti top walking their way, with a half-filled glass of vodka in her hand.

"Dhwani!" Aditi exclaimed as Dhwani hugged her without even a second's pause. From the smell and her gait Aditi could tell that she was already very drunk.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" Dhwani asked.

"Nura forced me to come... This is Nura by the way."

They both greeted each other with a 'hi' and a slight nod. Nura could not contain her excitement. She had only heard stories of Dhwani but now she finally would get to see her in live and in action.

"That's a nice top." Nura told her, "Are you here with somebody?"

"Nope. Came all alone."

This did not surprise either Nura or Aditi. They both nodded while trying to suppress their amusement.

"You girls just got here? Come on, let's get a drink for both of you." Saying this she took Aditi by the hand and pulled her towards the bar. Aditi mused at her misery. She was feeling uncomfortable at the nightclub already, and now there was Dhwani to add to the discomfort. Whenever it seemed to Aditi that things couldn't possibly get worse, they always did.

"What will you guys have?" Dhwani asked, "You want to do shots?"

"No!" Aditi screamed. The other two girls threw her an expression of bewilderment. After the incident with Cyrus, she wanted to stay away from tequila. "I'll just have a screwdriver."

As soon as they reached the bar, they heard a loud scream behind them. They turned to see what was happening. From afar all they could make out was that a gap had formed in the middle of the dance-floor. The DJ who was on a pedestal on the opposite side of the room, saw what was happening and turned off the music. He shouted something to the club staff and then announced into the mic, "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, don't worry we shall be resuming with the party shortly."

When the crowd moved further away forming a bigger circle, the girls were able to make out that there was a man lying face-down on the floor.

"Probably some guy who couldn't hold his liquor." Dhwani chuckled as she went back to placing the drink order.

Aditi didn't look away. She could tell that the man had not simply passed out. By the time two bouncers reached the spot, blood began flowing out from underneath the man. The drunk crowd surrounding him gasped. A man in a suit, who appeared to be the manager of the club, also arrived at the scene. One of the bouncers touched the man's neck with one hand, placed his fingers under the man's nose with the other, then he turned to his colleague and shook his head.

In the next five minutes the place transformed from a nightclub to a detention centre. Many of the patrons who were jovial just minutes ago were now either in shock or in tears. A boy took his distraught girlfriend by the arm and made his way to the exit but they didn't let

him leave. The manager had instructed the guards to not let anybody get in or out until the police had arrived. In order to pacify the crowd, they allowed the bartenders to continue serving drinks. But the number of people who were interested in alcohol had reduced exponentially. However, the tragic death in the middle of the dance floor didn't kill Dhwani's buzz. She placed the order for all three of them and the girls slowly sipped their respective drinks till the police arrived.

The police started taking photos and then turned over the body to examine it. Aditi was able to get a better look at the dead body. There were pieces of glass pierced into the man's torso. The man was young and based on his shirt and jeans, seemed to be from a pretty lower-middle class family.

One of the senior inspectors took up the task of pacifying the crowd. He assured everyone that in a few minutes a few more officers were arriving and that he would depute them to take down everyone's personal details and their statements and let them leave. He requested them to keep their identity proofs ready so that they could show them to the officers. At this point Aditi noticed that some of the younger patrons got nervous. They had probably used fake IDs to get in and were afraid of getting caught.

"He probably fell on his own drink and some of the glass pieces ended up killing him." Dhwani commented with the utmost indifference.

Aditi leaned towards Nura and whispered, "Nura I don't think this guy died from falling on his own drink."

"Why? What makes you think that?"

"The glass pieces aren't pierced so deep. Plus, he died almost immediately. There wasn't time for him to bleed to death."

"Maybe he just had a heart attack, or died from the impact of falling down. Could be a combination of things."

'Something doesn't seem right.' Aditi thought.

Half a dozen more cops entered the club and were preparing to take statements from the patrons before letting them go. Just then the senior inspector who was earlier pacifying people walked up to the girls. Aditi was now able to read his name off his badge – "Inspector Shirish Pandey".

"Madam," he said to Dhwani, "How did you know the victim?"

Dhwani who had just taken another sip from her glass coolly took her time to swallow the liquid in her mouth before answering the Inspector, "I don't know him. Who is he?"

"You were dancing with him earlier."

"I don't remember. I was just dancing; he might have been around."

"Madam, you need to come with us. We want to ask you some questions." Saying this Pandey called for a lady constable.

"You can't take her." Nura protested, "she said she doesn't know that gentleman. She was just dancing; he might have been around."

Pandey scanned Nura and Aditi. "Are you two with her?"

The two girls were hesitant to admit being friends with Dhwani. Not particularly because Dhwani was potentially about to be suspected of murder, but because it was embarrassing to be associated with her.

Before they could answer an inebriated Dhwani answered for them, "Yes, they are with me."

"Come with me then," Inspector Pandey took them through the door behind the bar counter into a narrow passageway. The door of one of the rooms on the right was ajar and there was a police officer hovering over the club's security guard who was operating the surveillance system. There were five tiny screens in front of him. Pandey made Dhwani stand in front and let the other two girls wait near the door.

"Play that footage again." Pandey instructed the guard. The guard sat up straight and turned a few dials. On one of the screens there was a video playing of the active dance floor. Each of the dancers could barely be made out. Pandey then pointed at a girl with an orange top. And surely enough there was Dhwani, dancing with the now deceased victim. *'It does indeed appear to a casual observer as if they knew each other.'* Aditi thought. All of Aditi's reservations were cast out when in the video Dhwani began grinding herself into the young man.

"So Madam," Pandey stared at her intimidatingly, "You still say you didn't know the victim."

"No, I didn't. I was just dancing."

"You dance this way with all boys?"

It was clear that the misogynistic Inspector had already made up his mind about Dhwani. Even Aditi and Nura found the video to be incriminating. She was definitely dancing with the guy as if he was her lover.

"Don't worry, Dhwani." Aditi pacified her, "My boyfriend is a lawyer, I'll just call him. He might be able to help us out."

Dhwani nodded and went back to arguing with Pandey, while Aditi stepped away from the loud shouting to make the call.

"Hey, Cyrus"

"Hey, Chikoo."

"Is that you? Your voice sounds different."

"Yeah, just down with a cold. What's up?"

"Listen, my friend Dhwani is in some trouble. We were in this club, and one guy just died in the middle of the dance floor. They have CCTV footage of Dhwani dancing with him. But she claims she doesn't know him. Right now, they are just trying to question her, but the way it's going, I think she'll be arrested soon."

"Relax, they need something substantial to actually arrest her. Otherwise, they'll just call her for questioning in the next few days. Have they determined the cause of death?"

"No, and even if they had figured it out, they haven't told us about the same. The guy just collapsed then and there."

"Hmmm. Do you think Dhwani is lying?"

Aditi thought for a bit. It would be a pretty stupid move to kill a guy in public especially after you have danced with him in the site of a CCTV camera. But then again Dhwani was pretty stupid. Nonetheless, she couldn't be a murderer.

"Actually, you know what, don't tell me." Cyrus stopped her before she could answer. "It's better I don't know. If you do suspect foul play, then why don't you just solve it?"

"Solve what?"

"The murder… solve it!"

"You mean like some detective?"

"Well, not exactly. Someone who can enter other people's bodies and read people's minds should easily be able to uncover the truth. Just enter Dhwani's body and from her memories verify if she did it. Then enter the body of anybody who is a suspect, and see what they know."

"I guess that's possible. But there is no other suspect yet. I can't enter more than three different bodies in the span of a day. Even that takes a toll on me. So entering the body of everyone in the club isn't an option. Knowing whether Dhwani is innocent or guilty doesn't take me too far. Even if I determine if she is innocent, it's proving that there's going to be a problem."

"Yeah. I get what you are saying. But if it's some random guy at the club who killed him just for kicks, now is the only time you'll be able to do your thing to him. So if you do suspect anyone, I would say go for it. In any case, I'll send you the number of one of my lawyer friends in Delhi. If she does get arrested, he'll help her in getting a bail."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Let me know how it goes."

Aditi cut the call and went back into the room. She was shocked to see that a woman constable was searching the contents of Dhwani's bag, while the others watched. The woman constable then pulled out a small packet containing a few pale-yellow pills and slowly handed it over to Pandey. He held it against the light and after a cursory inspection questioned Dhwani, "What is this?"

"Those are my anti-depressant pills."

Nura shot Aditi an expression of concern.

"Sure? Or is it ecstasy?" Pandey interrogated, "Why is it not in a proper bottle or wrapper? Which pharmacy sells medicines like this?"

"It's ketamine. They sell it in a bottle. And I bought it with a valid prescription from my therapist. I transfer a few pills to the little plastic baggy and put that in my purse instead of carrying the entire bottle." Dhwani pulled out the prescription from her purse and showed it to Pandey. He took the prescription in his hands and perused it.

"Madam, please come with us to the police station. You are under arrest."

He told the woman constable to prepare the arrest memo.

"Under arrest?" Aditi shouted, "You can't do that. You haven't even tested the pills yet. She just said it's not ecstasy."

"Doesn't have to be ecstasy. She said it is ketamine, that's enough."

"Ketamine isn't illegal. You can get it legally with a prescription, and she has that."

"I'm not arresting her for possessing the drug. Ketamine is also a date-rape drug. She has given it to the victim, who she claimed she doesn't know, just moments before his death."

"How do you know she gave it to the victim? You haven't even done an autopsy yet."

At this point Nura turned to Aditi and calmly told her, "Oh yeah, you missed it. When you left the room to call Cyrus, they played footage of Dhwani taking a pill out of her bag and giving it to the guy."

Aditi gaped at Dhwani with disbelief and exasperation as if saying, *'Oh Dhwani'*.

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The police were escorting Dhwani to their van that waited outside. Aditi and Nura were also called to the police station to give their respective statements. They left the narrow passageway and were back in the main area of the club. Aditi had her eyes fixed on Dhwani. As she stared at the back of her head, she contemplated entering Dhwani's body and reading her thoughts. But the mere idea of becoming privy to Dhwani's innermost thoughts and private memories scared her.

On the dance-floor there was a woman crying. The junior constable who was consoling her saw Pandey and walked up to him. "Sir, the victim's girlfriend is here. She was supposed to meet him at the club. She has identified the body."

Aditi saw the distraught girlfriend on the floor. There wasn't much time. She had to try and figure out more about the victim. Entering the girlfriend's body was a far better alternative to entering Dhwani's. As she closed her eyes and began breathing Aditi leaned a bit on Nura, so that the fall wouldn't hurt her. Then she was inside Heena Pandit's body and was flooded by her entire life's memories. As she was seeing the memories, she could hear a small scream of Nura who caught her body as it had become unconscious.

Heena Pandit's deceased boyfriend Rohit Daswani was a junkie. When she met him he was a cocaine and marijuana addict. She met him through mutual friends and they both had been dating for over a year. She insisted that he clean up his act, if he was serious about

getting married someday, which he was. He did cut down on the alcohol and the drugs, and when he was ready, she invited him home for dinner so that he could meet her father Mr. Suresh Pandit. Her father was a lucky man in all respects, except for the fact that he lost his wife a few years ago. He was a high-level executive at Seacrest Pharmaceuticals. Suresh Pandit greeted Rohit with a bear hug and they shared a few laughs during the dinner. Heena was pleased at how the dinner went. That was one week ago. Since then, he has been ill. He has been vomiting occasionally and having constant diarrhea. For his treatment he was supposed to collect some money he lent to his old friend, Bikram Ahuja, who worked as the DJ at 'The Crimson Door'. She said she would join him at the club once his transaction was done so that they could have some fun like they used to. But when she arrived, she found him dead.

Aditi returned to her own body, which was surrounded by Nura and Pandey. "I'm fine." she assured them.

"She is just faking it." the woman constables said from afar. Aditi knew what she had to do next. She was close to finding the answers. 'If he came to collect money from the DJ, then the DJ would be able to provide some more insight.'

Aditi closed her eyes again, and after a few seconds she was absorbing the memories of Bikram Ahuja. Bikram was a college friend of Rohit's. They bunked classes together and dropped out together. Bikram was the one who bought Rohit his first beer and was also the one who taught him how to drive. The two were inseparable at one time. Bikram began dealing marijuana and although he was making money from it, he was blowing it away just very quickly. It reached a point where he owed his suppliers a couple of lakhs. In order to repay it, he

borrowed money from Rohit. Bikram quit being a dealer and got a job as a D.J. He worked at a small club for a few months and was later offered a job at 'The Crimson Door'. When Rohit called asking for his money back, Bikram didn't have it yet. He asked the club manager for a cash loan, which he agreed to give the next day. Bikram told Rohit to meet him at the 'The Crimson Door' the next night. The next day, despite promising the money, the club manager told Bikram that he was unable to arrange for the cash. When Rohit arrived at night Bikram apologized to him. Rohit was upset, but Bikram offered to make it up by offering him some of his cocaine. At first Rohit was hesitant, but after some light convincing, Bikram and he had snorted Bikram's entire stash. Bikram took over the night shift while Rohit got drunk and danced. While playing the music, Bikram was told that a death had occurred and that he should stop the music and tell the people that they ought to remain calm. After doing so Bikram stepped down to see who died, and realized it was Rohit.

"Wait!" Aditi shouted, while still in Bikram's body. Inspector Pandey who was hovering over Aditi's unconscious body turned around. Nura, who was fully aware of what was happening, was calm as a cucumber. *'Should I make him confess?'* Aditi thought to herself, *'Did he encourage him to overdose in order to kill him off so that he didn't have to pay him? No, I don't know that for sure. I better just state the facts and let them draw their inferences.'* "The victim and I were doing cocaine together. This is a case of overdose, plain and simple." She said finally.

The police and the patrons were startled by this revelation. They turned to Pandey to see what his response would be. "Then you have to come into custody too." he said sternly.

Nura objected, "'Too'? You mean you are still going to take Dhwani?"

"Yes, she is not ruled out as a suspect yet."

Aditi was trying to think of what she could do. At the same time, she was disappointed that Pandey and the others forgot about her unconscious body so easily. Seeing no way around, she decided to enter the body of the only person who could stop Dhwani from being taken away. She re-entered her own body for a few seconds, and after a few deep breaths she was in Inspector Pandey's body. She had entered his body only for the purpose of directing the other offers to let Dhwani go, but in his memories, she found missing pieces of a puzzle. It was as clear as day to her.

"Let the girl go." She announced to no one in particular. Her discovery was so overwhelming she wanted everyone around to hear it. "I know who the real culprit is..." Aditi, still in Pandey's body, now looked at Heena in the eyes. "It was Mr. Ram Pandit. This girl's father." In an evening of twists and turns, this was clearly the most shocking for the patrons, club staff and police officers, alike. No one was more startled than Heena Pandit. "A week ago, I came across a complaint of someone attempting to steal a chemical known as "thallium" from Seacrest Pharma's laboratory. The accused one was Vijay Tripathi, a chemist. Oddly, he wasn't caught stealing it, but he was caught putting the bottle of thallium back.

"I wasn't assigned to the case so I don't know what happened to him… But I just learnt… somehow… that Vijay Tripathi was close to your father. Isn't that correct?" Aditi had to get the confirmation from her, since she couldn't disclose aloud that she got that information from her memories. Fortunately, Heena said, "Yes." and Aditi could continue, "You had seen Vijay coming to your house for years, but you couldn't connect the dots. You didn't realize that the only reason

your father was promoted so early was because the man who was next in line for a promotion died of a heart attack. And you also chose to ignore that things between your father and mother had gotten bitter and their relationship was at the worst possible stage just a few days before she died too. There might be more such instances. But each time your father managed to kill off someone using toxic substances he obtained from Vijay, he got more and more confident. So much so that in order to avoid being the villain in your eyes and at the same time preventing you from marrying this boy, he decided to take care of your druggie boyfriend in the same way he did others that he despised. You saw him tamper with the cup of coffee, but you chose to ignore it as something innocent. But it was the very opposite. The thallium causes vomiting and diarrhea, which you know he was suffering. The ketamine made no difference since it couldn't have entered the blood stream so soon. But the cocaine and alcohol acted as catalysts. Plus, the D.J. was playing music at over 128 beats per minute. The increased heart rate took his body to the tipping point and succumbed to their effects.,. So, we will be arresting Suresh Pandey as well as Vijay Tripathi."

There was a long pause, after which one of the woman constables started clapping steadily but loudly. She stopped when she realized that no one else was joining in. Heena kneeled on the ground in disbelief. She could not fathom that her father was a killer who even killed her mother and boyfriend.

"You guys can leave." Aditi instructed Nura and Dhwani, "And take your friend with you."

Nura smirked and lifted one of Aditi's arms and placed it around her neck, "Dhwani, can you help me?"

"Huh… Oh yeah…" Dhwani took Aditi's other arm over her shoulders and they both carried her out.

Aditi watched them leave as her connection with Pandey's body felt lighter. As soon as they were a few feet outside the club, she was sucked back into her body."

"Aditi, are you okay?" Dhwani asked as Aditi opened her eyes, gasping.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but we should go as far from here as possible… quickly!"

"I'm proud of you." Nura whispered in her ears.

Aditi was proud of herself too. *'If only Dhwani knew'* she thought to herself, *'Should I ask her about her depression? No. Not right now. She's been through enough and so have I. Performing the transferance this frequently in such a short span has given me a terrible headache. I'm never going clubbing again!'*

11. *His Realization*

I tracked down Mandana Mishra. When my disciples and I arrived at his house, we received insults from him. He was performing a ritual inside his house and considered our arrival as inauspicious. I returned each of his insults with a loving remark. A crowd had gathered outside his house to observe the commotion. The people tried to calm Mandana down. Finally, it was Mandana's wife, Ubbhayabharti, who managed to convince him to let me in and treat me like an honoured guest.

Ubbhayabharti was a knowledgeable woman and an ideal wife. Her virtues had gained her the reputation of being the earthly incarnation of the Goddess Saraswati – the Goddess of wisdom. The background to this belief stemmed from an old story relating to the sage Durvasa. Durvasa was once reciting the Vedas before the Goddess Saraswati in front of a large audience. During the course of his recitation, he made a small error which caused the Goddess to snicker. This angered Durvasa who put a curse on her and said that she would have to take birth in the human world and live an entire lifetime as an earthly being. It was believed that Ubbhayabharti was the result of that curse.

After Mandana and his wife served me and my disciples with food, I explained to him my purpose of coming to see him. Mandana agreed to engage in a debate with me on the condition that whoever lost the debate would become the disciple of the winner and propagate the views of the winner. I agreed immediately. When Mandana asked me who ought to judge the

debate, without hesitation I nominated his wife. Mandana and Ubbhayabharti were both surprised. Ubbhayabharti agreed, and so the debate commenced.

The doorbell rang. Mahima went to the door to answer it, with Dante right behind her. When she opened the door, an old lady stood before her. "It's me." she declared. Mahima let her in. By now she was used to seeing Robin in different bodies.

"Any luck?"

"No." Robin replied, "It's been five days now and I have entered the body of all my superiors and even one suspicious colleague. But nothing yet."

"This old lady works at your lab?"

"No, no. She's some insurance agent who I ran into at the railway platform when I got an escaping episode."

"Okay. But don't fret about the investigation. Tomorrow is a new day. Try entering some of your subordinates. Maybe they are responsible, or maybe it's nobody from the lab… You told me that this drug was something that a lot of people would kill to get their hands on or kill to make sure it didn't get into the wrong hands. You said it even has military applications. Maybe it was the intelligence agency of some other country's government who wanted to make sure that the drug never came into the hands of the Indian government."

"Maybe." Robin replied as he pulled open the fridge and opened a bottle of water.

"Oh, by the way, I had an idea today. You should go into the security guards who have access to the footage of any toll booths you guys might have passed. Since the other car was following you, you know

approximately what time they were there. You can get the car number and that's the best lead you'll get."

He took a gulp of water "I thought about it. There are no toll booths on the way. Although there might be a few other security cameras on the street. Will take me a lot of time and will have to switch a lot of bodies in order to get that footage. It probably even gets auto-erased after a few days…. But you are right. I should try that since this is a dead end."

They both paused as they heard the sound of the vintage scissor-gate elevator doors being opened on their floor. There was no other apartment on their floor, apart from Mahima and Robin's. So the visitor was most probably someone who had come to meet Mahima. The odd thing was that Mahima rarely had any visitors apart from food delivery men. But she had not called for any food that day.

Strangely enough there was no knock on her door nor did anyone ring the bell. She slowly moved to the door and peeked through the peep-hole.

"It's Celine. She is entering your house."

"Oh, yes, of course. Naturally... Wonder what took her so long."

Mahima turned to him and smiled, "Let's ask her shall we." Without waiting for any response from Robin, she opened the door and shouted out to Celine, "Celine?"

"Oh yes… ummm..."

"Mahima."

"Yes, Mahima, we met at the memorial service…. How are you?"

"I'm good. Just chilling with my grand-mother." Saying this she shoved ahead Robin who was hiding behind her.

"Hello aunty[10]." Celine greeted Robin.

Robin hesitated at first. He was not really good at thinking of things on the spot. He was only able to work up a much muffled "Hello." which happened to suit the old age of the lady. Through the half-open door, he caught a glimpse of the living room of his marital house. At the same time, he wanted to go in, as well as not go in. The pictures of his family on the table, the curtains which he hated but bought at Pramila's instance, the plethora of 'Charaka' brand cosmetic products that cluttered the sink and the hand-prints of Astrid which they stuck on the bedroom wall – all would have been too much for him to see.

"So here to collect something?" Mahima asked.

"No. Showing the place to a broker. I'll clean up this place and sort out things once the sale is confirmed."

"So late in the evening?"

"Tonight, is my last night in the city, and I just didn't get the time all these days."

"Where are you put up?"

"I was living with my parents. I'm spending the night here and will leave back for Hyderabad in the morning."

"Oh… Did you have dinner?"

"No. I'll call for something. What's good here?"

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[10] In India it is customary to informally refer to any elder man or women as uncle or aunty, even though they have no relation to you.

"I have an idea. Why don't you eat dinner at my house? I'll call for a pizza. I was craving something cheesy anyways."

"That's very nice of you…… But I hope I'm not imposing." Celine added after seeing the worried expression on Mahima's grandmother's face.

"Not at all." Mahima and Robin said in unison.

"Okay. I'll come over once I'm done entertaining the broker."

"Done." Mahima waived and closed the door. As she expected, the old lady behind her was wearing a huge scowl on her face.

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"One more slice?" Mahima offered.

"No. No. I've already eaten too much." her guest replied.

Robin sat there eating the salad that was ordered for him. An old lady couldn't be seen eating pizza; it would raise suspicion. He was hoping that Celine refused to eat that last slice that was offered to her, so that he could eat it after she left. But to his utter dismay, Mahima began devouring it.

"I should be going. How much do I owe you for the pizza?"

"Don't be silly. You barely ate two slices."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes. If you have time tomorrow, then you can join us for breakfast as well."

Robin tried to control his scowl. They all stood up from the table. Minor chit-chat continued as Mahima and Robin proceeded to walk her to the door. Mahima opened the door for her. At this moment

Robin felt the all too familiar experience. He had to think fast. Mahima was closest to him. But if Robin entered Mahima then the old lady would awaken in front of Celine. He ran to Celine and slapped her on her back.

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In the bedroom of apartment C-201 of Sakina Manzil, Pramila was weeping profusely, with her head on Celine's shoulder.

"Pramila, you need to talk to me. What happened?... Did Robin hurt you?"

Pramila shook her head, "No…. It's not that… It's… I'm pregnant."

"Oh, but that's good news, isn't it?"

Pramila cried profusely.

"What is it? You guys weren't planning on having a second child?"

Pramila sniffed and without making eye-contact she confessed sobbingly, "Robin isn't the father."

Celine's eyes widened with astonishment, "He isn't? Then who is?"

Pramila gathered all her strength to take deep breath. "My company placed a bid for getting the construction contract for the proposed Bandra-Versova Sealink. In order to make sure our bid cleared the technical evaluation stage, we had to lobby with Surya Patil- the Road Transport and Highway Minister. I was in-charge of acting as a messenger – handling all the unofficial correspondence between our Board and Patil's right-hand man Godbole. The day came when we had to make the first installment of payment to Patil. As instructed by Godbole I went alone to Patil's vacation house at Nashik five weeks ago to hand over Godbole the money. I went alone. When I reached

there the maid told me to wait at the corridor. I was shocked, when along with Godbole, Patil also came to the corridor to greet me. We went into his home-office, where I handed the bag over to him. Patil asked Godbole to go out and count the money. After Godbole left…" Pramila broke down and hid her face in her hands.

"What? He forced himself on you?"

Pramila nodded.

Celine took Pramila in her arms and held her tight.

"It's okay. It's going to be okay…"

Celine agreed to take Pramila to a doctor as soon as she was back from her trip to Palghar**.**

Three days later Celine and her parents were woken up in the morning by a phone call informing them that Pramila was dead.

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Robin, who was still in shock, was watching Mahima shove an unnerved old lady outside her door.

"I'm sorry madam, we aren't interested in getting a new insurance policy. Thank you!" saying this, Mahima shut the door on the old lady who was wondering how she had got into that flat.

"Phew!" Mahima sighed "That was a close call." She turned to Robin, now in Celine's body, who was wearing expressions of utter shock. "Hey, everything okay?"

12. *Her and Dharamguru*

My debate with Mandana went on for over seventeen days. Ubbhayabharti tried her best to be impartial, yet when she saw her husband was losing the debate, she herself felt that she could not be entirely unbiased. So on the eighteenth day she put a garland of flowers around each of our necks and declared that nature would decide who would be the victor and the vanquished among us. During the course of the debate, whoever's garland withered first would be considered defeated.

That day the arguments were so complex that the spectators who had come to witness the debate could barely comprehend them. By evening, Mandana was perspiring and had become visibly agitated. By the end his garland had withered away while mine was still fresh and lustrous. Ubbhayabharti fairly declared that Mandana had lost the debate. Mandana graciously accepted defeat and agreed to become a Sanyasa under my tutelage.

Ubbhayabharti could not stand to part ways with her husband. She turned to me and said "O Sanyasa! You know very well that the sacred texts provide that a wife forms one-half of a husband's body, mind and soul. Therefore, by defeating him, you have only won half of him. In order to make your victory complete, you must engage in debate with me, and defat me." I was taken by surprise. I did not expect to receive a challenge from Ubbhayabharti.

"Inhale…" came the man's voice followed by "Exhale…" a few seconds later. Aditi felt a wave of nostalgia as she diligently followed the instructions which the man on the stage dictated into his microphone.

The moment Nura found out that Dharamguru was coming to Gurugram to hold a one-day yoga camp, she booked two of the higher-priced passes to the event for both of them. They were sitting in the eighth row, a bit towards the right of the open ground, facing Dharamguru who was sitting atop the stage. Aditi wasn't sure how many rows were behind her, but the crowd definitely stretched beyond her field of vision.

The camp promised peace, relaxation and enlightenment. Ironically, the venue where it was held was usually used to hold rock concerts.

Once Dharamguru instructed them to open their eyes, Aditi took a moment to examine her surroundings. There were hundreds of middle-aged men and women, particularly women, who sat on white linen yoga mats. They all sat in *padmasana*. On Aditi's left was Nura, who was fixated on Dharamguru as if it was only him and her on that open ground.

Aditi continued to stare at her, in a hope to get her attention. She wanted Nura to know how miserable she was feeling. Although Aditi never mentioned it to Nura, she was always disheartened by the fact that Nura still admired the celebrity guru, despite living in the same house as someone who had the ability to use meditation to possess other people.

Even otherwise, Aditi had a very poor impression of Dharamguru, but could never tell Nura about it since it would offend her. Dharamguru was a grizzly, unkempt elderly man with a beard which was perpetually unkempt and unwashed. He wore only a pink lion-cloth which exposed his hairy chest and back.

Dharamguru professed spirituality but not any particular religion. Dharamguru travelled throughout India and occasionally outside India, as a public speaker and master of yogic practices. A few years ago they had established an *ashram* in Pune, through his non-profit organization known as "Way of Life". Followers of Dharamguru from all over the world gathered at the Pune ashram to learn from him. Most of them never left.

Aditi hated godmen like him who pretended to have all the answers. She believed that those who lived in the *ashram* were brainwashed by Dharamguru's story-telling, easy-answers and knowledge of random scriptures from varied religious texts. Among his followers were also high-level politicians and media personalities, which made him rather influential.

The *ashram* was being funded, not only by donations, but also the profit from his own line of *Ayurvedic* products which he sold through one of his companies under the brand name 'Charaka'. Despite a large amount of skepticism from critics of Dharamguru over the manner in which the profitable Charaka brand and the "non-profit" Way of Life foundation's funds were being used and exchanged, no audit or investigation was ever conducted by the tax authorities.

In an ideal world, Dharamguru would be one of her targets. '*That's the problem with having partners*' Aditi thought to herself, '*You have to compromise on your personal beliefs in order to spare their emotions. And each time you get restrained from doing something because of them, you resent them for it. If only I had Nura's consent to target Dharamguru. Inadvertently, she already got me within a hundred feet of him. I just need to get eighty feet closer. But with the dozens of security personnel around the*

stage, it's almost impossible. I'm sure Nura could come up with a plan in ten seconds… But she won't.'

As Aditi was plotting how she would get close to Dharamguru, he himself provided her with the solution.

"Now if any of you have any questions about the 'Way of Life' then please raise your hands. I will come to you." Saying this he walked off the stage and was handed a wireless microphone by one of his attendees. Dharamguru walked up to a woman in the first row who had her hand raised. He handed her the microphone. The lady spoke into it, "Guruji, my son is addicted to some violent shooting game which he plays on his mobile the entire day. How do I get rid of his addiction?"

As Dharamguru answered the query, Aditi decided to capitalize on the opportunity. '*I just need to wait for him to come closer.*' She checked whether any of the attendees around her were raising their hands, but nobody in proximity was. There was another woman far-off, towards the left of the ground, in the third row. *'If he goes to her, he'll probably continue taking the microphone in that direction. I need to bring him my way. But how? Why aren't the people around me raising their hands? These guys paid a bomb to sit in the front, why don't they make the most of it?'*

Aditi was compelled to do something she loathed. She raised her hand, much to Nura's surprise. After Dharamguru was done lecturing on how addiction could be curbed and controlled, he searched for the next querist. His gaze fell on Aditi who had her hand raised, and he threw his signature expression of serene content at her as he walked towards her. When he crossed the fourth row, Aditi closed her eyes and began breathing deeply.

Nura watched and frowned as she realized what was happening. Aditi's hand, as well as her entire upper-body fell side-ways. Dharamguru stood still for five seconds. Then, with an expression of mild bewilderment he continued to walk towards Aditi and bent before her as she lifted herself up.

He jested, "Daughter, I am not a celebrity. Please do not faint just because I'm here. Are you okay?" The other audience members who were startled by Aditi's black-out chuckled with relief. Aditi nodded with an expression of disgust.

"Get her a glass of water!" he beckoned one of his nearby attendees. He then patted Aditi on the shoulder, a touch which he didn't realize Aditi tried to repel. He stood up and began walking away but then paused and turned as if remembering something. "Do you still want to ask your question?" he asked Aditi, while still speaking into the microphone. He came back to her, bent down and held the mic in front of her mouth.

After a pause Aditi muttered, "How do you sleep at night?"

The expression of content on Dharamguru's face faded. Without even looking at Nura, Aditi could tell that she was glaring at her. Aditi calmed herself down and quickly added, "Wh…What position do you sleep in *Guruji*? Because I sleep on my abdomen and lately, I've been facing back pains in the morning."

Dharamguru's serenity was restored and he proceeded to explain how the nerves are bundled and wrapped around the spinal cord. Aditi wasn't paying attention. Her mind was occupied with the memories she just saw. She re-played the important bits in her head because she

didn't want them to fade. As she did that, she turned her head to and confirmed that Nura was glaring at her.

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One hour later, Aditi and Nura made their way to the parking lot, outside the ground. There were too many people exiting the ground together because of which neither could Aditi tell Nura what she had discovered, nor could Nura tell Aditi off for performing the transferance on Dharamguru.

They avoided eye-contact till they reached the car. Once they did, Nura and Aditi sat in the driver and passenger seats, simultaneously.

"How could you -" Nura blurted as Aditi at the same time urged, "Nura, listen to me!"

Nura waited for Aditi's explanation.

"Have you ever heard of the Nine Unknown?" Aditi asked her.

13. *His News Time*

Ubbhayabharti had challenged me for a debate. I was hesitant to accept it at first. Scholars never debated with women. Ubbhayabharti saw my hesitation and living up to her reputation as an incarnation of the Goddess Saraswati, she began citing precedent – "The sage Yagvavalkya debated with Gargi. The sage Janaka debated with Sulabha, then why do you hesitate to debate with a woman?"

I saw that there was no avoiding her challenge. In any case, debating with her was necessary to serve my cause. I had undertaken to bring all those who opposed the Vedanta school of Hinduism to my side, this included Ubbhayabharti.

She proved to be a more worthy adversary than her husband. The debate went on for several days more than the debate with Mandana. Then there came a point when she realized that her arguments did not have a leg to stand on. She was desperate to not lose her husband to me, so she came up with an idea. She knew that I was a celibate and had very little knowledge of worldly pleasures so she asked me intricate questions about intercourse, eroticism and sexual desires.

I politely requested Ubbhayabharti to restrict her questions to those about Hindu scripture, since the questions she had posed had nothing to do with the subject of the debate. She replied, "You claim to understand people and other living creatures, yet you do not have the slightest idea about sexual conduct which is the cause of continuance of life itself. Lust forms a huge part of the lives of

the living, yet in your studies you have completely neglected it. Please tell me how can I let my knowledgeable husband become the disciple of an ignorant Guru?"

I was beginning to understand why scholars avoided debating with women. They adopt any means necessary to protect that to which they have an emotional bond. I was in a dilemma. I could not answer her questions. And if I lost, as per the terms of the debate I would have to give up the life of a Sanyasa and lead the very life which she claimed I knew nothing about.

After thinking for some time, I said, "You will understand that I, being a celibate have no knowledge of the subject on which you wish to question me. According to me, the questions you put are wholly irrelevant to the purpose of our debate. Nonetheless, I am ready to indulge them. My only request is that you give me one month's time to conduct some research on them and get back. I'm sure you will extend at least this courtesy to me."

"Very well." she replied, "The inevitable shall be postponed by a month."

The crew greeted Abhijeet Das as he made his way to the news desk. He always ignored them, but on this particular day he seemed to ignore them more than usual. They were, of course, not even slightly surprised by his demeanor. After all, he was known for being the most arrogant and controversial news anchor in the country.

It was no secret that Abhijeet was in the pocket of the ruling party. He noticeably avoided any criticism of its members and openly challenged members of the opposition to come on his show 'News Time with Abhijeet' in order to be "interviewed" by him. The

interviews were nothing but a farce, just like the panel discussions. Any partisans of the opposition party were drilled and put down.

Abhijeet's show, which was the flagship show of the channel Independent News, did have high TRPs. Perhaps some people just loved to watch screaming matches and didn't care if it was being broadcast on a news channel. Or perhaps, Independent News inflated their viewership ratings by bribing low-income individuals to keep their TVs turned to his channel. Whatever it was, the statistics were in favour of Independent News.

There are over hundreds of FIRs filed against him and almost a dozen pending defamation cases. They don't bother him in the least. He is paid enough by the ruling party to not only cover his legal expenses but also buy enough properties in premium areas of Mumbai and still have some money left to ensure that his family has access to every possible luxury.

Abhijeet took his seat at the desk and let the make-up woman do some final touches while he continued to type on his mobile. Ms. Reema Karnik, the News Director and one of the Executive Producers of 'News Time with Abhijeet' spoke into her headset microphone "Testing 1,2,3…". Abhijeet nodded to the camera, indicating that he could hear her through his earpiece. The make-up woman took off the tissue paper tucked into his collar. Reema then gave him a ten second countdown at the end of which the show's intro music played. Abhijeet began:

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, today's breaking news, the riots in Uttarakhand get worse as the government gives no sign of retracting the Agricultural Reforms Bill, which would involve acquisition of several acres of farmers' lands."

"Why are you talking about the Uttarakhand riots?!" Reema yelled into the headset microphone. "You are supposed to be talking about the Prime Minister's speech where he has promised financial schemes for small businesses." She shouted out to the broadcast technician to check whether the teleprompter was running properly.

Abhijeet pulled out his earpiece and continued, "The peaceful protest turned into riot when the police began using excessive force on the protesting farmers. Of course, our channel won't be showing that footage since we are a news channel funded by the ruling party. But feel free to search for the videos online.

"In other news… the reason due to which the Colaba – Mandwa Seabridge had collapsed was not because of any terrorism attack as the media has you believe, but because AHB Buildcon used inferior quality cement. I'm sure you can verify this fact with their CEO - Mr. Krishnan… or if he isn't forthcoming, you can try some of the employees involved in the project. In any case, should such a company be given the Bandra-Versova Sea Link project? Well, our Minister Surya Patil surely thinks so… But ask yourselves, why is he so motivated to give it to them?"

Reema's jaw dropped. The entire news team was in panic. "The teleprompter is working fine. He just isn't reading from it. Should I cut the feed?" the technician asked Reema. She wasn't able to decide.

"Now, before I get cut-off, there is one last bit of *juicy* news that I must divulge about our Road Transport and Highways Minister. He is planning on leaving his current party in order to join the opposition. Usually, I don't disclose my sources for a story, but on this occasion, I'll make an exception…" Abhijeet leaned forward and in an almost whispering tone revealed, "It was Patil himself."

All over India, everyone stared at their TVs, flabbergasted. Reema's phone is buzzing with calls from other producers of the show.

"One final thing my fellow citizens of India, who watch me every night either for entertainment or even worse- because you genuinely believe what I do here is report the news – Open your eyes!

You'll find some of the money that the rightwing political party pays me in the safe deposit boxes in the name of my uncle Yuvraj Prakash and close friend Shweta Singh. I have already tweeted the details on my official handle just before the broadcast began. But you will find only a fraction of the money there. Most of it has already been laundered through four shell companies, details of which I tweeted just moments ago.

Stop believing the words of an ignorant loud mouth who calls himself a 'journalist'. Question your government who spends more time and money in marketing than actually looking out for the welfare of its people. And most importantly, question yourselves for acting like sheep and instead…."

People watching 'News Time with Abhijeet' covered their ears as a long beep sound emitted from their TVs. Instead of Abhijeet's face they were now seeing a screen with colourful lines with the words 'We are experiencing technical difficulties. Please stand by.'

It was, of course, Reema who cut off the feed. She stormed towards the news desk. "What the fu-"

"Good job guys!" Abhijeet shouted to the stunned crew as he took off his lapel microphone and threw it on the desk. He walked out of the newsroom. Reema was not going to let him go easily. She followed him outside the newsroom, continuously yelling at him. Abhijeet

didn't even flinch. He entered the elevator and continuously hit the door-closing button before Reema could make it. Robin, who was in Abhijeet's body, waved at her as the doors shut.

HIs phone was buzzing like crazy. But he ignored it. Robin's mind was occupied with something else. When he scanned Abhijeet's memories he had learnt about something called 'The Nine'.

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Mahima opened the door. "It's me." declared the teenage boy. Mahima let him in.

"Could you avoid coming to the house in men's bodies? Especially the young ones. The aunties in the society are giving me judgmental looks. If they see a teenager coming here at 11 in the night, they might call the cops."

"Sorry… Did you catch the news?"

"Yes, I did!" Mahima showed him her laptop, "You have broken the internet! '*#WTFAbhijeet*' is trending on Twitter. There's already a meme going viral of Abhijeet dropping truth bombs. Independent News is broadcasting the news about the Chitrakoot floods. They are pretending as if nothing happened. They don't know what to do with themselves."

Robin opened the fridge to get his water. There was no pride to be felt for his actions. He knew he was running a marathon, not a sprint and he was not going to let early victories get to his head.

"But Robin, I need to ask you - Why are you doing all this? Not that I'm complaining. Abhijeet had it coming. But wouldn't it just be better

to enter Patil's body or the body of someone close to him and…" Mahima did a stabbing action, "…finish the job?"

As he plopped on the sofa with his bottle of water, Robin got serious. "No. I don't want him to get off that easily. At least not so soon. I will first expose him in front of the world. I will ruin his reputation, shatter his ego, make all those who are close to him turn against him. No, I won't kill him. If Patil dies, it will be by his own hands."

Mahima listened intently. The air in the room had gotten heavier. She thought about what she could do to lighten the mood. "Okay, cool. So… Chinese?"

"Yes, Chinese sounds lovely." Robin said in a pleasant tone. As he gulped the water and let out his trademark "Ahh…" sound, he thought to himself *'Should I tell her about the Nine? Yes, I might as well.'*

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"What the hell is this?!" Patil yelled as he threw the newspaper at Godbole's face. Patil looked like a stereotypical Indian politician. White hair, medium built, wrinkles on his face and perpetually wearing a *kurta*[11] and jacket. Recently, he also began fashioning a beard.

Godbole was sitting on the couch with his limbs spread out, as if he were chilling at a nightclub. His dark complexion and long curled black hair made just added to his loafer-like countenance. Patil continued to pace across his home-office located on the first floor of his Mumbai bunglow.

[11] A loose collarless shirt.

“First, five days ago Abhijeet Das said on national television that I’m planning to join the opposition before the upcoming election. And who does he cite as his source, Me! After that Shinde, Johar and Mehta - other members of my own party start disclosing the party’s illegal activities, but they go out of their way to specifically mention me as being involved in them. And they give details of where the police can find evidence. Fortunately, I was able to keep the police at bay till I was able to destroy the evidence. But even they are facing a lot of public pressure now. How long do you think it will be before the police are at my doorstep?”

“You are just being paranoid. Whatever is going on, the whole party is suffering because of it. It’s just a coincidence that your name came up the most.” Godbole lied. He was the first to suspect that Patil was being targeted, but he didn’t want him to get more riled up then he already was. “I’ll look into it if you want.”

“You mean you haven’t already looked into it?” Patil glared at him.

“I have... But I haven't got any information beyond what is already in the news. Each one of them who had an outburst in the last few days claim they have no memory of the incident. Few even recanted the statements made…”

“Bullocks! Who would buy that load of rubbish? This is all some big conspiracy by someone who is out for me. The memory loss is just an excuse. They know that recanting the statement makes no difference. Once the public knows it, there’s no taking a statement back. Especially when you have told everyone where they can find the evidence!”

"A conspiracy? Being played out by over a dozen people? No. If it were, I would have known about it one way or the other. I have men working under Das and Johar. Men who are more loyal to me than they are to their own bosses. No, there's no way a conspiracy of this size could have escaped my radar. Plus, most of the people who made the confessions aren't too bright. They can't be part of any scheme that requires any level of intellect. This isn't an Agatha Christie novel. In real life a bunch of people can't secretly act together to execute a plan so perfectly…"

"How about instead of just saying 'no' to my theories, you tell me your theories?"

"I must confess that my theories are almost as ridiculous as yours. First, I thought someone might be blackmailing them and this whole going back on the statements they made was just to cause confusion. But then it happened too often, and for over six people of high stature to be blackmailed and not even disclose the fact to their close underlings… Highly unlikely. Then I thought about them being drugged or someone putting on a mask to look like them…But…"

Patil scowled, "You've been watching those Mission Impossible movies again... Be realistic. If you keep talking about such fantasies, I'll assume you relapsed."

Godbole flinched. Patil rarely ever made reference to his past drug addiction, and had never used it to mock him. The fact that he just did was a testament to how much the recent events had rattled him.

"I want answers, Godbole. And I want…"

"Sir!" Patil's personal assistant barged into the room, frantically.

Patil screamed at her "We are in the middle of …"

"Sir, the NCB…" before she could complete the sentence, five men and one woman in tight formal shirts and trousers entered the room, with a manner befitting Napoleon's imperial army.

The senior most of them led the way and he approached Patil, "Hello sir, I'm Rahul Gokhale from the Narcotics Control Bureau. We are here to search your house for any illegal drugs."

"Drugs?!" Patil raised his voice further. "What f*cking nonsense. Show me a court order authorizing it."

"The NCB does not need a warrant issued by a court when we have reasonable suspicion that someone is in possession of drugs, sir. I do have this warrant signed by the Mumbai Zone Director of the NCB, authorizing me to conduct this search." He handed over a piece of paper which Patil snatched and perused. He then looked up at Godbole. Godbole nodded. The Mumbai's Director of the NCB was Satbir Singh, an officer who had only reached his current position because of help from Patil. This uncharacteristic behavior was in accordance with the recent trend of people close to Patil turning on him.

"When was that order signed?" Godbolde demanded.

"Just this morning." Gokhale replied.

Without saying another word, Godbole proceeded to leave. He wanted to observe Singh right up to the moment when Singh would assert that he had no memory of signing the order.

None of the NCB officers had the cojones to stop Godbole. They were reluctant to even carry out the search of Patil's house. But the orders came from above and they were bound to follow it. None of them had ever conducted a search of the house of any high-level political figure.

They were used to searching the houses of low-level drug peddlers and television stars. Both these classes of people were never in a position to exact vengeance on them. But someone like Patil could ruin their entire careers and make the lives of their families a living hell. However, the officers took solace in the fact that Patil had bigger problems to worry about and that his political career would soon come to an end on account of the recent controversy surrounding him.

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Godbole sat in his SUV which he parked across the street of NCB's Mumbai branch office. Oddly, the place didn't seem too secure. He was sitting there for hours and none of the guards found it even mildly suspicious. Of course, Mumbai is so crowded that it's hard to get noticed even if one wanted to. Finally, he saw Singh leaving the building in his chauffeur driven car. Godbole followed him from a distance. Singh's car went straight to his house in the police quarters at Bandra. Godbole watched the gate of the government building from inside his SUV which he parked several feet away. He had binoculars in his glove compartment, but he didn't dare use them so close to a police residential quarters, lest some of the nearby officers saw him.

For hours nothing happened. At about 4.20 a.m. a man in a windcheater and track pants left the gate. Godbole, who was half-asleep, jolted in his seat when he recognized that the early riser was none other than Singh. He started his engine and followed him. Singh jogged towards 'Bandstand', a kilometer-long promenade which was a popular jogging track and hang-out spot in Mumbai.

Godbole was at least fifty feet away from Singh at all times. By the time they reached Bandstand, it was a little past 5 a.m. and a few other joggers had just arrived there as well. Singh stopped jogging

somewhere in the middle of the promenade and sat on a bench that faced the sea. He watched other joggers passing by him, as he was being watched by Godbole in turn.

By 6 a.m., nothing happened. Godbole was contemplating whether to just approach Singh and interrogate him, since he felt his investigation reached a dead-end. *'Even if there is something to find here, how do I find it? What am I even looking for?'* he thought. He stopped out of his car and began walking towards Singh.

Just then, Godbole witnessed something strange. Singh sprang off the bench as though someone pinched his bottom and he hopped toward a petite teenage girl in a turquoise tank top and black sweatpants. For no apparent reason, he touched her on the arm and froze. The girl was just about to express her shock and surprise over the man pouncing on her, but before she could, she herself froze for about five seconds. In those five seconds two elderly gentlemen in matching khaki shorts who witnessed the incident, gathered to see what had happened.

"Hey! What is this? Is this man troubling you?" the first man asked angrily.

"Oy! Acting pervy at such an age… Do you have no shame?" roared the second one.

Singh gaped at them, dumbfounded. Ironically, it was the teenage girl who saved him and his reputation. "Don't worry, this man is my father. He suffers from Alzheimer's. I bring him here every morning because the doctor says it improves his cognitive abilities. He recognized me just now so he was calling for me. Nothing inappropriate here. But thank you for your concern."

All this while Singh wondered where he was. “See, now he doesn’t remember where he is.” She continued. “I better take him home. He gets very agitated when he gets confused like this.” Singh stared at the girl whom he couldn’t recognize while the two elderly gentlemen apologized to him and walked away. She took him by the arm and dragged him away.

Singh and the girl passed by Godbole, but didn’t notice him. Godbole watched on *‘What the f… What just happened? Who is this girl? She clearly didn’t bring Singh here. To the best of my recollection, Singh doesn’t even have a daughter.’* After walking a little away, the girl looked around, as though making sure the coast was clear. She then said something to Singh and briskly walked away from him. Godbole had a decision to make. *‘Where is she going? Do I follow this girl or stick to Singh?’* He watched as a discombobulated Singh made his way towards his house. *‘Definitely the girl’*.

Godbole got into his SUV and followed the jogger girl for fifteen minutes. She jogged all the way to Santa Cruz and entered a building called Sakina Manzil. She made an entry in the register maintained by the watchman and proceeded inside the ‘C’ Wing of the apartment building, as the watchman leered at her.

‘What do I do?’ Godbole thought. He quickly got out of his SUV and walked towards the gates of Sakina Manzil. The watchman ordered him to make an entry in the register if he wished to go in. After all, Mishra was least bothered who was entering the building as long as they made an entry in the register. A person could walk in with an AK-47 and it would not perturb the indifferent night-watchman.

Not wanting to raise any suspicion, Godbole stepped towards the register. He checked the last entry which read: *‘Name: Bhumi Kapoor;*

Visiting: C-202; Time: 6.30 a.m.' "Who lived in apartment C-202?" Godbole asked. Mishra threw him an expression of utter boredom. This visitor was a stark contrast to the fit teenager who he was admiring just seconds ago.

"Miss Deshpande stays there… But who do you want to visit?"

"You know what, I think I have the wrong building." Godbole turned around and left.

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It was 9 p.m. and Madanlal just closed his cigarette shop. He bid farewell to the biker gang who were chatting and fooling around near by. Madanlal was disgusted by them, but he had to keep up the pretense as they were his most loyal customers. As soon as he left a mysterious figure could been seen walking towards the gang. One of the five noticed this and pointed it out to their self-proclaimed leader – a young man whose yellow teeth matched his flurescent shirt and the highlights at the tip of his spiked hair. As the figure came closer, they could make out from the curvy silhouette that it was young woman. No sooner did they realize this that they started with their howling and lewd remarks. To their amusement, the figure lady stopped and slowly sat on the ground with her legs folded.

The leader took two steps closer to see what was going on. Then he blacked out. When he regained consciousness he found himself standing with his pocket knife covered in blood. Around him were his four friends, lying on the road, with their throats slit. *'This can't be!'* He involuntarily placed his hand on his own abdomen, and felt a certain wetness. His already widened eyes widened further as he slowly looked down. He was bleeding profusely from a deep cut. He fell to

the ground. Meanwhile, Aditi stood up, dusted herself off, and walk away. She had expected that she would feel something after the incident, but oddly, she didn't feel anything.

14. *Her and the Nine*

I had only one month to conduct the 'research' required to engage Ubbhayabharti. I asked my other disciples to wait at Mahiṣmati and left along with Padmapāda (Sanandana) to a neighbouring kingdom.

"Guruji, where are we going?" Padmapāda asked me as we were walking through the dense forest.

"I am going to see King Amaruka."

"King Amaruka? But I heard news that he passed away yesterday."

"Yes, he suffered a heat stroke while hunting."

"So, we are going to pay our respects?"

"No, Padmapāda. I am going to use 'parakayapravesavidya', i.e. the science of entering into the body of another, to enter into the late King Amaruka's body."

"What are you saying Guruji, is such a feat even possible?" Padmapāda regretted the phrasing of his question as soon as he finished asking it.

"Yes, of course it is. With utmost concentration and training a yogi can transfer his soul from one body to another. I will enter King Amaruka's body and live his life for a little less than a month. The King had more than a hundred wives. After learning about physical love and other worldly pleasures, I will return back to my own body and continue my debate with Ubbhayabharti."

"Guruji, I'm sure an omniscient Sanyasa such as yourself knows what he is doing. Yet I am unable to comprehend how an ascetic can engage in such activities? You have maintained the purity of your soul your entire life, why would you tarnish it now? And what if you are overcome with those carnal desires, what then?"

"I understand where you are coming from Padmapāda. But let me explain. You know that Sri Krishna was surrounded by beautiful women who admired and worshipped him. Yet, he was never overcome with sexual desires. In one who is liberated, there are no attachments in the earthly realm and desire for the earthly sense of enjoyment will not arise. It is Sankalpa, the brooding imaginative association, which is the cause of desire. The commandments and prohibitions of scriptures are applicable to men in ignorance who live with the deep-rooted conviction that their body is their self. In the case of one who has realized even here that the Self is without all contacts. The Self and the world supposed to be born of the Self are not different, the world having no existence apart from the Self. How can one who realizes the whole world as a mere appearance, be affected by anything? If a person performs Yagas and Yajnas in a dream, will he derive any benefit from it? Even if I indulge in the enjoyment of sex-love with this body, no evil will result from it. Did Kumarila Bhatta become a Buddhist simply by becoming a pupil of a Buddhist monk and chanting their mantras? However, in order that the world may not be misled in respect of virtuous conduct by observing my example of a Sanyasa indulging in the practice of sex-love, I propose to gain the experience of sex-life through the body of another person whose dead body I am going to enliven by temporarily identifying myself with that body. And regarding your apprehension about me being engulfed with carnal desires –

If I do so and leave my own life to live that of King Amaruka then it will mean that the school of thought that I have spent my life preaching is meaningless. I doubt we have to worry about such an outcome"

After I was done speaking, Padmapāda became quiet and stopped walking. I looked at him in anticipation. He touched my feet and after receiving my blessings, we continued on our journey.

Seventy-two-year-old Pesi Daruwala was sitting in his study at Shamballa Mansion, reading a copy of 'The Hiram Key', while in his maroon satin robes. However, what Pesi referred to as his study room can be more accurately described as a library. The fifty feet tall shelves which almost touched the ceiling held over sixteen thousand books on almost every imaginable subject. At the centre of the room was a large table, on which Pesi liked to spread out his various reading materials of the day. Finishing his entire reading list gave him a kind of 'intellectual orgasm' which was incomparable to any other feeling he could experience at his age. On the opposite side of the table was a maroon cardboard box, the size of a baby's coffin.

Many of the books were just reference books, which were not meant to be read cover to cover. But Pesi has read them all the same. As he would say time and again in various interviews, he owed his entire success to reading. In his youth he would read at least one book a day. Despite his responsibilities increasing after he inherited chairmanship of Daruwala & Sons from his adoptive father, he increased his reading to an average of two books a day. It didn't take him too long since his reading speed averaged 3,800 words per minute. The books didn't need to be maintained in the library since he always remembered

anything he read. But he kept them as one keeps trophies on display in a case.

With his adoptive father's teachings and his great intellect, Pesi was able to turn his multi-million-dollar Indian oil company into a multi-billion-dollar international conglomerate that had its hands into everything from tea to telecommunication. The two-hundred-year-old Daruwala & Sons was now the holding company of Daruwala Group.

Shamballa Mansion was considered to be the most expensive private residence in the world and stood as a symbol of Daruwala's wealth and power. Most people found it to be an atrocious structure which had no flow in its form. From the outside it looked like the building consisted of seven blocks of different dimensions piled one over another. The other most common criticism was that the Mansion was an ostentatious display of disparity of wealth since it stood in a city which had one of the world's largest slums.

As any other one-percenter, Daruwala was criticized for not utilizing his immense fortune for public welfare purposes. It was also shamefully obvious that the Prime Minister of the country was in his pocket and the government policies were frequently changed to suit the requirements of his company. The controversies were of no concern to Daruwala. His company's products were superior to those of competitors and he crushed any possible competition before they became a serious threat. Since the company was in almost every sector, even his greatest critic would find it challenging to completely boycott products of Daruwala.

As Pesi was almost finishing his book, his personal assistant walked into the study room. "Sir, Mr. Ankhad is here to see you."

Daruwala nodded. She opened the door and let Prasad Ankhad in.

Prasad was a young man with sleek black hair combed all the way back. He wore a shiny black designer suit and a Rolex watch. Strangely, he never carried a pen since he believed that writing things down was a sign of poverty. "The truly wealthy don't even sign their own cheques, do they?" he always quipped. Prasad was a self-made hecto-millionaire who initially made his money in a series of successful computer software and mobile applications. Over the last few years he acquired a huge chunk of shares in Daruwala & Sons and had become a key member of its management.

"Come, Prasad. Come sit next to me."

"How are you feeling, sir?"

"I'm fine. Just some mild chest pains. You must be wondering why I called for you like this… so abruptly on a Saturday night when you would rather be partying with your new wife."

"No sir, I -"

"It's okay. You see, Ashwin, it's no secret that I have always admired your drive and your management skills. You remind me of a younger version of me. You lost your parents at the age of sixteen. I was orphaned when I was three years old. I was raised in an orphanage at Dongri. I don't remember a single thing about my parents. But I was told that my parents were a lower-middle class couple who worked 9 to 5 jobs just to make ends meet. When I heard that, I thanked God for taking them away from me. If I had to live like them, I would end up killing myself. The one thing I loathed the most was a life of mediocrity. I was the smartest boy in my orphanage. I had started a magazine on finance when I was a teenager. I sold the entire

publication after just two years for a million rupees, which was a huge sum in those times, especially for me.

"I used those funds to start several other businesses – a recruitment agency, a real estate services agency and a fitness centre. All the ventures were so successful that in 1968 "Entrepreneur Today" magazine listed me in their '20 entrepreneurs under 20' list. As destiny would have it, Kamlesh Daruwala and his wife Simran Daruwala, the last living members of the Daruwala family, were searching for a child who they could adopt, since they were unable to have a child of their own. They needed an heir to take over Daruwala & Sons once they passed away. So they reached out to orphans who had shown entrepreneurial spirit. When we were summoned to meet them, we were under the impression that they were just interviewing us for a job. When I met them for a third time, they made me an offer – not for a job, but to be adopted. I agreed in less than a minute.

"The paper work was completed and the news was made public. I was the media's favourite for the longest time. But it wasn't the short-term fame born of hype and glamour that I wanted. I needed to prove to myself that the boy raised with over two dozen children in a house which was one-third the size of this room could, through hard work and persistence, reach a position which other business moguls could only dream of." Daruwala shook his head as if realizing something, "I'm sorry, I trailed off again. A bad habit caused by old age. If I do it again, please let me know. I won't think of you as being rude for doing so… Anyways, back to the point. As you know, in the last seven years I've taken a back-seat, only micro-managing the operations of the Daruwala Group. In the last five years you have put in more time and effort in the group than I have. That's why in the next AGM I'm

going to publicly recommend your name as Chairman of Daruwala & Sons."

"Sir! But it's too soon. I still have a lot to learn from you and -"

"Enough with the false modesty Ashwin. I don't care for it. Don't try to hide your ambitious side, it's one of the things I like about you. Each one of the board members already knows about it and I'm sure you were expecting it for a long time… I actually called you for something else..." Daruwala took a deep breath, "You remember I had once told you that I was a member of a group of influential individuals that meets every six months?"

"Yes, I begged you to tell me more about it, but you told me I wasn't ready."

"And at the time you weren't. But you are now. This organization consists of only nine members and there can never be more or less than nine. I'm not exaggerating when I say that this 9-member organization controls the entire Indian sub-continent and also has a huge influence in countries in the western hemisphere."

"Are you serious?! What's it called?"

"Since it was always meant to be a secret society, it has no official name. The members have referred to it by different names over the years. The current members refer to it as "The Nine".

"The Nine? Why does that sound familiar?"

Daruwala grinned, "You must have heard of 'The Nine Unknown', an old fiction novel."

"Right! It's about a society of nine men formed by King Ashoka."

"Yes. All fiction comes from a place of truth and some of the members of the Nine believe that our organization is a continuation of such a society which was really formed by Ashoka. However, there is no means of confirming it since the Nine don't keep any records or leave any proof of their existence. But there is a tale which has been narrated and passed down through generations."

"A tale?"

"Yes, apparently the Nine consisted of masters of nine fields – economics, astronomy, biology, micro-biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, communication and spirituality.

"What was the second-last one? Communication?"

"Yes, communication. Sending of messages through various means to other humans, or to extra-terrestrial beings or even beings in the after-life." Ashwin raised one of his eyebrows in skepticism. "Anyways, as you have seen, most of the fields are scientific and sensible. Whenever the master of one field died, he was replaced by another master. A few generations after the Nine was formed, there came a time when the masters of communication and spirituality dominated the group. They wanted to take the group in a different direction so they began replacing the men with scientific outlooks with those who believed in black magic and the occult. Soon, the master of astronomy was the master of astrology, the master of psychology was the master of mind-control, and so on. Over the centuries, the system of members being masters of particular fields disappeared and so the members were just some of the most influential people across the Indian subcontinent, who also engaged in paranormal practices. The group also stopped caring about the welfare of the society and was focused only on their own dominion over it. For millennia, they have been pulling the

strings over all major activities in India. They orchestrated the Timurid massacre of Delhi, they instigated the Battle of Panipat and they decided if and when India would get independence. They decide which upcoming individuals should be allowed to grow and who should be crushed. Few years ago, there was a vote about you as well…" Ashwin threw an expression of shock. "Don't worry, you were unanimously voted to be allowed. There are a lot of other things they influenced but you will learn about it in time. You must be wondering why I'm telling you about the Nine. My adoptive father Kamlesh Daruwala was a member of the Nine, till I was given his seat. For Daruwala & Sons to progress, it is important that it be represented in the Nine. Therefore, along with the Chairmanship you must also take my seat in the Nine."

Ashwin was almost salivating. "Of course, I will. How do I join?"

"First, you will be made a provisional member. That will allow you to take my place in the meetings and vote on my behalf. When I die you will be made a full-fledged member."

"When you die?"

"Yes, once a member, you are a member for life. Only death can relieve you."

"Alright... Who are the other members?"

"I can't tell you that now. The next meeting will be held in two days. Each time the meeting is hosted by a different member who has to make all the arrangements. Since the Nine doesn't have any post like 'President' or 'Chairman' each meeting is headed by the host of that meeting, who takes everyone through the agenda. Hosting a meeting isn't easy, particularly when we can't tell our own personal assistants

or even our family members about the Nine. We don't use our drivers or even our own cars to travel to the meetings. We don't take any security with us either. You too will have to make sure you reach the meeting place unnoticed. I will send you the exact venue and time through my secretary who will hand-deliver it to you in a sealed envelope. Make sure, nobody else sees its contents. It will also contain the password for entering the meeting place."

"Password? Can't they just verify my identity?"

"No. Open that box in front of you."

Ashwin looked at the maroon cardboard box that was on the table and slowly opened it. Inside was a dark-purple silk hooded robe and a very peculiar black mask. The mask had a small beak-shaped obtrusion in the front. They had two narrow slits for eye holes below a frowning forehead.

Ashwin was puzzled. "What is this?"

"The crow has been the symbol of the group since its inception a millennium ago. Make sure you put on the mask and the robes before you knock on the door and say the password. The other members are also required to put them on before entering."

"This looks like a smaller one of those European plague doctor masks… I've seen them in other places too, I think."

"They are used a lot in works of fiction. They are generally depicted as being used by occult organizations. But they were actually being used by the Nine for over a millennium. We aren't sure if their use by plague doctors and in popular culture came from the Nine or whether it was just a coincidence…. The masks serve three purposes – One, they prevent new-comers from identifying existing members until

they have been initiated. Second, apart from concealing the face they even alter the voice. So, if the session is being recorded no one will know who the members are and which member made which statement. Third… well, it is a tradition and this organization is all about tradition..."

"So… is this some kind of cult?"

Daruwala didn't answer or chuckle or even look Ashwin in the eyes. "Just come for the meeting and don't be late."

"What would the initiation ceremony entail?"

Again, Daruwala didn't answer immediately. In fact, this time it was rather evident that he was intentionally avoiding eye-contact with Ashwin. He sank back into his book and somberly instructed him, "Make sure you do everything they tell you. The Nine don't like naysayers. Anyone who poses a threat to the group or their ways of doing things find themselves in a funeral pyre earlier than expected. Understood?"

Ashwin gulped and nodded.

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The fateful day arrived. Ashwin had received the details of the venue and password in a sealed envelope from Daruwala. The meeting was being held in an abandoned warehouse in Bhandup, a suburban locality in Mumbai. As per the instructions, he changed cabs three times to get to the venue. He even caught the first cab half a kilometer away from his house and stopped the third cab about half a kilometer away from the location and walked the rest of the way, which wasn't easy since he was carrying the maroon box under right arm.

The warehouse was exactly the way he imagined it – shady, old and neglected. No other human could be seen in its vicinity. It had a huge door with a smaller door built into it. He was about to knock on the small door, but was surprised to find it open. He stepped inside and found a huge wall just ten feet away from the entrance that created a partition in the warehouse. From the ceiling hung a single bulb which was illuminating the place which was empty but for a huge bottle green trunk that lied on the left side of the enclosure. The wall opposite Ashwin had a wooden door and handle. He tried to press down on the handle and open the door, but it was firm. He knocked on the door.

A voice came from above the door which startled him. "Password?" It was at this moment that Ashwin noticed that just above the door was a black instrument that appeared to be a speaker.

Ashwin fumbled. He had forgotten to put on his attire. He pulled out the robe and mask from the box under his arm and put them on. "Uhhh… Yeah… Wait a sec... Yeah… the password is… 'Brahmastra'." As soon as Ashwin uttered the words there was a sound of a buzzer. He pushed the door which now gave.

The inner room was in complete contrast to the outer one. It was a huge conference room with bright white walls and a proportionately sized oval-shaped black table with ten black leather chairs around it. In the far end of the room, there was a door on the right side, which was in accordance with the colour-theme of the room, and was also black.

The room was air-conditioned and very well maintained. There were even bottles of mineral water kept on the table. In fact, it could have passed off as a perfectly normal conference room if it weren't for the

fact that nine people wearing purple robes and black masks with beaks weren't sitting around the table.

The member who sat directly opposite the door at the other end of the room was the only one who had a mic in front of him. "You must be the newbie. Come, sit at the empty chair next to your sponsor." He indicated towards the only empty chair in the room, which also happened to be the one closest to Ashwin. The man sitting next to it nodded at Ashwin. From that gesture and also the physique of the man, Ashwin could tell it was Pesi Daruwala beside him.

Ashwin scuttled to the chair and took his seat. He attentively fixated on the man who addressed him. He was sitting at the head of the table and there was a remote in front of him. Ashwin inferred that the man was the host of that day's meeting and that the remote controlled the intercom as well as the door.

"I'm sorry if I'm late."

"You are not late. We call newbies two hours after the meeting starts so that we can finish other business first. We are right now on one of the last items of the agenda, then we will come to your initiation."

Ashwin nodded. He looked around through the narrow eye slits in his mask. The scene reminded him of how sometimes ravens would gather on a single tree to have a discussion.

The host continued, "So, if nobody has anything else to say on the current agenda, let's put it to a vote. All those in favour of starting an Indo-China conflict at Ladakh, please raise your hands." Ashwin's heart skipped a beat when he heard this statement.

Eight hands shot into the air, including the host's and Daruwala's. Apart from Ashwin, who was not entitled to vote yet, only one member sitting opposite Ashwin did not raise his hand.

"Then that seals it. The plan of action to execute the same will be shared using our usual means of communication. As always please do your respective parts."

Ashwin was completely mortified by how casually the topic initiating an international conflict was being discussed. He was eager to know who each of these men were. But the Nine's attire made it impossible to tell their identities. Except for one man who sat at the head of the table… He had a long salt and pepper beard. *'Oh man, is that bearded man Dharamguru?'* He thought to himself *'What the hell has this Daruwala gotten me into?'*

"Now, for the initiation… Brother, please stand." Ashwin stood up; his legs were trembling with fear.

"Now I will administer the oath, please say 'I agree' once I am done." The host stood up as well, "I solemnly swear to keep sacred and inviolate the secrets of this degree and its members. To obey the collective decisions taken here and act on the same without demur or delay. To hold the tenets of this Society above each and every law, principle or any oath or obligation taken by me." Saying this the host paused.

"Oh. Yes, I agree."

"Good. The initiation is almost complete."

'Seems to be getting done rather quickly.' Ashwin thought to himself.

"There is only one more thing. You must seal the oath with blood."

Ashwin almost defecated in his trousers. “B…Blood? Do I have to cut myself?”

All the attendees in the room, including the host, let out a loud laugh. Ashwin felt as though he had just been pranked. The host recovered himself from his laughter quickly, “No, no. The blood of members, including provisional members, is precious to the Nine. We wouldn’t want you shedding any blood...”

Ashwin sighed in relief as the host walked towards the black door at the corner of the room. The host opened the door and revealed a young girl, who could barely be more than eight years old, in a white dress tied to a vertical stretcher. She had a red plastic ball strapped into her mouth, behind her teeth, with the black straps going around her head to secure it in place. Her limbs were fastened to the stretcher, as was her torso. Tears flowed from her satin grey eyes and trickled down her cheeks as she wriggled profusely.

“…You will have to shed her’s.”

Once again there was silence. “I don’t understand.”

Daruwala, who was now standing behind Ashwin, answered the question, “As part of the initiation you must kill a virgin. You should be thankful we arranged one for you. In the earlier days provisional members had to bring their own for the initiation.”

“What?! No, you are joking. This whole thing is a prank, right? Is this how an ultra-billionaire like you get his kicks? By scaring the shit out of people?”

“This is no prank.” Assured the host as he handed Ashwin a long machete. Ashwin couldn’t hold it without shaking.

Daruwala came up close to Ashwin and whispered, "Either the girl dies tonight or you do, choose wisely."

Ashwin examined the girl as he slowly walked towards her. She tried to scream and tried even harder to break free from her restraints. But it was of no use.

The other members cheered on. "Welcome to the Nine, brother!" The host congratulated him.

One of the other members commented, "You can tell a lot about a new member by the way he kills. What will it be brother? Will it be a single stab? Or multiple slashes? You can never go wrong with a simple slit of the throat." Ashwin was overwhelmed with the cheers and the jokes. Daruwala shouted from behind, "If you want, you can rape her before you kill her. That's what I did!"

'These people are animals!' Ashwin thought to himself. He could tell that Daruwala wasn't kidding. *'I suppose I have no choice. It's kill or be killed and I have no intention of dying today. But I'll try to make this as painless as possible for her.'*

As he stared into the girl's fear-filled grey eyes, he lifted the machete with both hands and raised it above his head.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a gunshot. The machete fell to the ground. Ashwin looked down at his abdomen. He was bleeding on his right-side. He fell to the floor the next second. Everyone turned towards one of the members who held a gun pointed towards Ashwin. It was the same member who had voted against the Indo-China conflict.

"What is going on–" the host shouted before getting shot in the throat.

As the other members ran helter-skelter, the member with a gun began shooting everyone in the room. Two of the members dashed towards the wooden door but were shot before they could reach it. Daruwala and Dharamguru just ducked and took cover behind the table. The shooting had stopped. Daruwala heard the sound of the gun being re-loaded. He decided to take the chance to crawl towards the wooden door.

Just when he was about to reach the door and stand, the masked assailant appeared in front of him. He looked up and saw the inside of the barrel of the gun. "Please. Don't." he pleaded before a bullet was fired between his eyes. Then the assailant slowly walked towards Dharamguru who was cowering below the table, and put him out of his misery.

All the members, other than the assailant, laid bleeding on the floor, either dead or dying. Ashwin watched from afar as the assailant took off his bird-like mask. He recognized the man as being the most influential news anchor in India. "Abhijeet Das?" he muttered as drew his last breath.

The girl watched in horror as Abhijeet Das walked towards her. Seeing the girl's expression, he seemed to remember something, "Oh, yes, I forgot. I'm sorry." Saying this he walked back to the table and picked up the remote. He hit the buzzer of the door and then, for seemingly no apparent reason, he shot himself in the gut, much to the girl's shock and surprise.

Outside, Aditi immediately emerged from the bottle-green trunk lying in the outer room and barged into the conference room, which now had a shade of red added to it's black and white interiors. As Abhijeet Das lay on the floor with his hand on his gut, he watched Aditi

removing the girl's restraints. He had absolutely no idea who those two girls were or how he had gotten in that predicament.

15. *His Undoing*

We reached a cave atop a hill, close to the city where King Amaruka used to reign. I turned to Padmapāda (Sanandana) and said, "I shall meditate in this cave. We are surrounded by a lush forest and there is also a lake nearby. You will not have any problems looking for food and water here. Once my soul enters Amaruka's body, my own body will be in a comatose state. You will have to preserve it."

Padmapāda bowed indicating his acceptance of the task. I entered the cave and began meditating. My soul left my body through my torso and travelled several kilometers till it could find the body of King Amaruka.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on my back, surrounded by small twigs and branches. I pushed them aside and sat up straight. I was atop a pile of large branches and around me was an entire congregation of royal women, ministers and common folk. Near me was a man holding a stick with a flame on one end. On seeing me they all awed in shock. It was King Amaruka's funeral pyre. I had entered the body only moments before he could be set aflame.

On seeing the dead King come back to life, his hundred wives (technically widows) clinged to me. I stood up and made my way to the throne while trumpets, conchs and other musical instruments were being played. I acted as if nothing had happened. When I sat on the throne, the ministers appeared before me and expressed their surprise and happiness in seeing me alive.

They advised that I should have the medical experts hanged for incorrectly declaring me dead. I refused and said that it was no fault of theirs. They were puzzled by their king's new found compassion and understanding.

"Here you go, sir." the vendor handed over Godbole the freshly prepared *paan*[12]. Godbole paid him and made his way back to his SUV where three of Patil's other men waited for him. "Have a nice night, sir!" the *paan* vendor shouted from behind. Two other men were following the jogger who left the building the evening of the same day that she went in. That was three days ago. The two men following her were instructed to inform Godbole of any suspicious activity. But they didn't have a single incident to report. '*As if those idiots would know suspicious activity when they see it.'* he thought to himself. He would have very much liked to follow up on every lead himself. But in this situation, he had no option but to rely on Patil's goons for continuing his investigation.

Within two hours of learning Mahima's name and address, Godbole was able to obtain her entire bio-data from his contacts in the local police. After that, he and the three henchmen spent the last three days observing Mahima's routine. They observed her coming and going and occasionally they checked the register to see in case anyone who had entered the building had visited her apartment. They learnt that she only left the house once in a day, in the morning, to take her dog

[12] Betel leaf with areca nut.

to the nearby park. This stroll in the park took about an hour. The only people who visited her apartment were delivery boys.

This morning, Godbole had deployed the men to break into Mahima's house and plant bugs in it. Fortunately, the building security was a joke. The moment Mahima stepped out with her dog the men entered the building, one after the other, with intervals of five minutes. The first man pretended to be a carpenter. The second was disguised as a food delivery boy. The third was dressed as a postman. They all entered random names and apartment numbers in the register.

The pretend-carpenter was an expert at picking locks. By the time the other two men arrived, the door was already opened by him. He kept an eye on the door as the other two planted half a dozen bugs throughout all the rooms of the house. Once they were done, they just closed the door behind them and left, without any trace that they were ever there.

Godbole was now able to listen to everything Mahima was saying. However, ever since she returned home all he heard was her occasionally talking to her dog. Bored, he went off to get some *paan,* leaving his colleagues to monitor the receiver and alert him if they heard anything suspicious. To a casual observer it appeared as though a group of men were listening intently to music on individual headphones, while sitting in their car. Godbole joined his colleagues and continued to listen to the white noise, as he chewed on his *paan*.

At about 9 p.m. Godbole sent the men home and continued to listen on his own. Two hours later, Godbole heard a doorbell, followed by the sound of a door being opened.

"It's me." A man's voice. Godbole listened intently.

"How was your day?" Mahima asked politely.

"Did you see the news?"

"Yes! Abhijeet Das, Pesi Daruwala, Dharamguru, Rohaan Poonawala… so many people have gone missing. Did you do that?!"

"Don't be silly. I mean, granted that I did want to take down the Nine ever since I learnt about them when I entered Das' body… But even I couldn't kidnap or kill all of them in one night."

"So, it's a coincidence that every member of the secret society that you resolved to take down, before you could once again focus on Patil, just happened to disappear."

Godbole flinched on hearing Patil's name.

"What can I tell you…" Godbole heard the mystery man say. "Someone got to the Nine before me."

"I still don't get why you didn't speak about the Nine on national television when you were in Abhijeet Das' body, just like you outed so many other people's nefarious activities."

"I was on the fence about it. I didn't have too much time to process the information. At that time, I thought that the country wasn't ready for something of that magnitude. If I told you some of the activities that the Nine were responsible for or some of their traditions, I don't think even you could fathom it. Also, can you imagine how Indians would react once they found out that the most influential people in the country were members of an organization that basically ran the entire country. No, it wouldn't have been prudent to talk about the Nine on national television. It wouldn't do any good either… The Nine hid their tracks perfectly, so as to ensure that no member had any

evidence against the other members. The Nine had to be finished, outing them would not serve any productive purpose."

"So it had nothing to do with the fact that news of the Nine would dilute your revelations about Patil?"

The man did not reply.

"Are you hungry?" Mahima asked.

"No, the man whose body I'm possessing had a very heavy dinner. He's a nutritionist, but he has more junk food than a teenager. I think I'll just hit the hay."

"Why don't you possess the body of someone who is well rested? That way you never have to sleep."

"I like to eat and sleep occasionally. I miss it. It makes me feel alive."

"Makes sense, I suppose. What's your plan for tomorrow?"

"I'll catch up on what's going on with Patil."

"He must still be having his hands full with the NCB investigation that you started when you were in Satbir Singh's body.

"Yeah. That was just something to keep him busy while I dealt with the Nine. Now that the Nine is taken care of, I can focus on Patil again."

"Cool. Goodnight. Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight."

The conversation Godbole was listening to had come to a halt and he was left trying to make sense of it.

16. *Her New Friends*

I ruled the kingdom through Amaruka's body only for a few days. A rumour spread that the king had become far wiser and kinder since his resurrection. Other kings revered my wisdom. The people were baffled by my generosity. The ministers were in awe with my dedication to the kingdom. A few of the sharper ministers began doubting the King's identity because of the changed behaviour. Those who were able to deduce that the King was possessed decided to take measures to ensure that the person who had taken over his body would not return to his own. They were too pleased with their resurrected King. This was realized by me only much later when one of the guards accidently revealed to me that they had been instructed by the council of ministers to immediately burn any life-less body they found in the kingdom. I was not worried since I had utmost faith in Padmapāda.

But my research was still pending. After a few days, I handed over the task of administration of the kingdom to a handful of the ministers and I confined myself to the bed-chamber to spend time with the king's many wives. I engaged in all kinds of amorous activities. The women were charming and amenable. There was even a game that we played where I would roll a dice to decide what kind of sexual activity, I would engage in with them. I learnt how to plant a kiss on a woman with eyes half-closed and how to speak words that aroused them. I even shared wine with them.

Amaruka's body was reacting to all the sensual activities, but I myself found them to be a perversion of the Universal truth in which I was immersed.

Cyrus and Nura listened to Coldplay on the car-radio, as they waited for Aditi to return. Nura's navy blue hatchback was parked just a little away from the warehouse where Aditi was infiltrating the Nine. It had been five hours since they dropped off the trunk in which she was hiding at the warehouse. It had gotten dark, and a thick fog surrounded them.

"What's that?" Nura broke the silence.

"What's what?"

"I think I hear footsteps." she responded as she got out of the car. In the distance, she saw the silhouette of someone coming from the same direction where the warehouse was situated. As the figure approached, Cyrus and Nura made out that it was Aditi carrying a child in her hands.

"Aditi, what happened?" Cyrus yelled.

"Long story. She was being held captive… Had to rescue her." Aditi placed the girl down so that she could stand on her own feet.

Nura bent down to talk to the girl, "Are you okay?"

Instead of responding the grey-eyed girl just gave them a blank expression. She didn't know who the people were or what was going on, but she was certain she was in a better situation than she was a few hours ago.

"Are you hurt?" Nura inquired.

The girl did not respond.

"What's your name?" Cyrus asked.

The girl turned to Aditi for help. "She can't speak." Aditi explained. She's deaf and dumb. She communicates in sign language. We need to find someone who can…"

Before Aditi could finish her sentence Cyrus began making hand gestures to the girl. The girl, who was holding Aditi's hand, let go and responded to Cyrus' gestures with her own.

"You know sign language?" Aditi and Nura asked in unison.

Without stopping the gesture, he responded, "Yeah… I took a course when I was in college, because I thought it would look good on my resume." Cyrus paused and sighed as he watched the girl's hand movement. "It's bad."

"What happened?" Aditi probed curiously.

"Her parents sold her off weeks ago because they felt she was a burden. Since then she's been kept captive and was being moved from one place to another."

Nura shot the girl in an expression of shock and clenched her fist.

"What do we do?" Aditi contemplated aloud. "We obviously aren't going to take her back to her parents."

"Let's take her home..." Nura said authoritatively. "We'll get her some food. Bathe her and let her spend the night… We'll discuss the further course of action tomorrow morning."

The others nodded, except the oblivious young girl.

On their way back to the car, Nura held Cyrus by the arm and whispered aggressively, “Later, I want you to find out from her where we can find her parents.”

17. *His Last Act*

I had unknowingly spent so much time in Amaruka's body that I had almost forgotten my true identity. One day, a group of musicians came to the palace to entertain me. They played a melodious song about a bee who had left the hive in order to gather honey but who had become so engaged in his task that he lost track of time.

When the song was almost over, I managed to recognize that the musicians were none other than my own disciples who had come to the palace to remind me of my actual identity. It had been exactly one month and I had to meet Ubbhayabharti the next day to continue the debate. I directed that presents must be given to my disciples and as soon as they left the palace, I left the body of Amaruka. The people began crying on seeing the lifeless body of the King. This was the second time they had to experience sorrow over his death.

I awoke in my own body. But was surprised to find that it was on fire. Apparently, when Padmapāda and my other disciples were away at the palace, the royal guards had found my body in the cave and set it aflame. I recited a hymn to put the fire out. Once the fire subsided, I walked out of the cave where I was reunited with my disciples.

The time had come to resume my debate with Ubbhayabharti.

Patil stared at Godbole as they sat in his home-office. Godbole just finished narrating the conversation between Mahima and the mystery man he overheard through the wiretap.

As Godbole was talking, Patil stroked his beard and listened intently. He didn't say a single word until Godbole was done talking. After Godbole was done, he paused before muttering, "Godbole, I'm already under the NCB's scanner. If you have started doing heroin again, I cannot be in contact with you anymore… the risk is too much."

Godbole was taken aback, "But sir, this information is one hundred percent -"

"A man who can enter the bodies of others!" Patil raised his voice, "You expect me to believe that load of crap?! You need help, Godbole. Get out! You aren't any help to me like this!"

"But sir -"

"I nurtured you and respected you as if you were one of my own. Even when you got addicted to the crystal, I still didn't give up on you. I made sure you got the help you need. All I ever asked in return was your loyalty and that you use that intellect of yours to keep me at the top. But now, when I need you the most, you are giving me this bullshit. Even Dharamguru who I looked up to for guidance has now disappeared. In the end, I knew I would be alone in this battle. I will get to the bottom of this on my own. Go!"

Godbole scowled. He knew his information was farfetched, but he still didn't expect such indignation from Patil. Godbole didn't try to defend himself. His ego was damaged far too much for that. Instead,

he stormed off without saying a word. As he walked out briskly, he heard Patil screaming from behind, "And don't bother coming back."

Godbole knew that only one thing could restore his reputation in Patil's eyes and that was to bring him conclusive proof of the existence of the man who could enter the bodies of others, or better yet, bring the man himself.

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There was a knock at the door. As usual, Mahima opened the door without peeking through the peephole.

At the door stood a man with a dark complexion and curled hair.

"It's me", said Godbole.

Mahima flung the door open fully to let him in. "I thought I won't be seeing you till tomorrow." As she entered the kitchen, "You want some tea? I'm making some for myself."

"Yeah, sure." Godbole had not even paid attention to the question. He was busy examining the house. He needed to get as much information as possible out of Mahima without letting her realize that he was an impostor.

"By the way, the Chairman of our society spoke to me. Apparently, he's been receiving several complaints from other members regarding strange men spending their nights here. He said he himself is chilled about it, but if it continues, he'll have no option but to send me an official warning. So, you have to stop coming here in bodies of men, understand? Anyways, who is this supposed to be?" she shouted from inside the kitchen.

"This?"

"The man whose body you are in, who is he?"

"Oh! Yeah, this is one of Patil's henchmen."

"Patil's henchman?" She came back into the living room with two cups. She handed one to Godbole. "How come you decided to get so close to him? I thought you were planning on mentally torturing him from afar for a while longer."

Godbole listened intently as he took a sip. Every word he uttered had to be measured carefully. One slip up and his entire fact-finding mission would be in jeopardy. "Yes, I decided to change the plan a bit. I thought it would be better to stay close to Patil and keep an eye on him."

"So, did you meet him in person yet?"

"Patil? Yes… I did."

"How did you control yourself?"

"It… wasn't easy."

"I'm sure it wasn't. I'm glad to see the amount of restraint you are exercising." Mahima said as she sipped her tea. "What happened? I'm missing the 'Ah' sound." She smirked.

''Ah' sound?' Godbole thought to himself. *'What the hell is this supposed to be? Should I say I miss it too? No, it may not fit in the context. Should I just ask what sound she is talking about? No, too risky.'*

"I'm sorry what did you say?" he asked in panic, with the intention that it would buy him some more time.

"The 'Ahh' sound you make after each sip of tea…You aren't making it for a change."

"Oh, that. I'm… trying to stop making it now."

"Good. I never used to mind it, but it used to draw Pramila crazy. I remember one time…"

'Pramila? Pramila Pinto?' Godbole's felt as if his heart sank all the way to his abdomen. The moment Mahima mentioned the name 'Pramila' he ceased to listen to anything else she had to say. His mind was no longer in apartment C-202 of Sakina Manzil. It fell into a vortex of his memories and he was back in his SUV. It was dark and he was tired as he had been following a navy-blue sedan, all the way from Mumbai to Palghar waiting for it to reach a secluded road. When they reached the MH SH 40, he checked to make sure that no other pedestrian or vehicle was in sight. *'This is my chance.'* Godbole thought to himself. He hit the accelerator hard and waited till the front of his SUV was just on the right-side of the rear of the sedan he was following. Once it was, Godbole turned his steering wheel hard to the left, causing it to bump into the sedan. The lady in the front passenger seat woke up. She turned around and there was a split second when her eyes widened. She had recognized Godbole. He had no option but to finish the job. He turned to the left once again, and this time kept pushing the sedan towards the left till it went off the road. Once he succeeded, he heard a loud thump. He got out of his car, and walked towards the sedan which had collided with a tree. He peeped through the window and saw the bodies of the couple and one child. He put a handkerchief on his hand and tried to open the car door. But it was still locked. Not wanting to spoil the scene which appeared to be an accident, he decided not to use any kind of force to open the door or put his hand through the half-open passenger seat window. After scanning the three bodies from afar he was satisfied that the injuries were so severe

that they weren't alive and that they weren't breathing. He went back into his SUV and drove off.

"Hey, are you listening?" Mahima waved her hand in front of Godbole's face, startling him.

"Yeah, sorry. Was just thinking of something." He knew the '*why*', he just needed to learn the '*who*'. *'Pramila's husband died along with her. Then who could it be? The father? Did she have a brother? Or someone else?'*

While Godbole was in thought, Dante came out from the bedroom, fully rested from his nap. When Dante saw Godbole he growled. Godbole viewed Dante with contempt. He wasn't afraid of dogs, he just loathed them. He never understood why a person would keep a dog as a pet instead of a cat. To him, dogs belonged in the wild and not indoors.

"Dante! Dante!" Mahima shouted, "What has gotten into you?" She approached him to pet him. While petting him she froze with fear. She had had the scary realization that the man who she let into her house and who was sitting right next to her may be a stranger. She stood up straight and went back into the kitchen. Godbole noticed the change in her demeanor and suspected that the jig was up.

"By the way do you remember that time you and I went to the amusement park?" she asked as she opened the kitchen drawer.

"Yes, I do." The voice came from behind her, "It was good fun." The man had followed her to the kitchen and was standing right behind her. Dante followed the man too, still growling. The man tried to subtly peek into the drawer and Mahima followed his gaze to the knife that was lying inside it. She knew that if the man was an

impostor, then he would attack the moment she tried to reach for it. She had to try a different approach. Instead, she grabbed the strainer.

"I'm making some more tea. You want some?"

"No, I'm good."

Mahima put some water in her kettle and turned on the stove. They both were fixated on each other while Dante was fixated on Godbole. Mahima still wasn't a hundred percent sure whether the man in her kitchen was Robin or not. Robin and she had never been in an amusement park before so far as she remembered, but there was still a small chance that they were and she was unable to recall it or that Robin simply answered in the affirmative because he was busy in his thoughts. She had to follow up the question with another one. One which would confirm whether the man was Robin or not.

"You remember our kiss on the giant wheel?" she asked while placing her right hand on his chest.

From Mahima's body language Godbole inferred that she had some sort of romantic relationship with the mystery man. He felt a slight tug as Mahima very slightly pulled him by his shirt. *'I better kiss her, or she might get suspicious.'* He thought.

"Of course, I do." He lied as he leaned forward.

With her left hand Mahima picked up the kettle which was on the stove and threw the boiling water from the kettle right on Godbole's face.

As Godbole screamed in pain, he tried to open his eyes. Mahima had opened the kitchen drawer and picked up the knife. She stabbed him in the abdomen, but the knife didn't go in too deep. He had grabbed

her hands and pulled the knife out of his body. A struggle ensued between the two of them where both of them tried to take control of the knife. Godbole would have won had Dante not joined in. Dante bit Godbole's leg with all his might, causing him to scream even louder this time. He pitied himself on being put into such a sorry state by a woman and her dog. He used his right hand to pull out his Swiss army knife from his pocket and before Mahima could see what he had pulled out, he slit her throat.

As she fell to the ground, Mahima felt a mixture of remorse and satisfaction. The remorse was because she felt she had failed Robin, the man she had a crush on. The satisfaction because her time had finally come. She never told anybody about it before, but she always had a death wish. It was not as though she had a bad life. In fact, she had lived a pretty balanced life. But by her very nature, she always found living to be suffering. A nihilist at heart, she always wondered what was the point of living. Like Sophocles she too believed that it was best to never be born, and if born then next best was to die as soon as possible. It was only because of her religious upbringing that it was ingrained into her that suicide was a taboo.

As soon as she hit the ground Mahima became a helpless witness to Dante being stabbed in the back with the same knife that slit her throat. *'No please. Not Dante.'* She tried to speak but she was unable to make a sound. Finally, Dante was unable to hold on anymore and let go of Godbole's leg. Godbole quickly limped towards the main door of the house, as he held the spot where he had been stabbed and left. In his haste, he forgot to close the door behind him.

As Mahima saw the pool of blood around her getting larger, her life flashed before her eyes. Once it was done, she thought to herself *'So*

that's what it feels like. I wonder if this is how Robin sees people's memories when he enters them.' The thought amused her. Then she glanced at Dante lying next to her. Dante was still breathing, but his eyes were closed. She felt sorry for him. She reached out her hand and placed it upon his head, in order to pet it one last time. And then she drew her last breath.

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Meanwhile, Godbole limped out of the gate of Sakina Manzil. The watchman was sound asleep and there was no other soul in the area. Across the road was Godbole's SUV. He sat inside and started driving with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on his wound. He decided to go to the Holy Cross Hospital first and call Patil once the doctors patched him up.

But Godbole didn't get too far. Within ten minutes he got light headed and his vision began getting blurred. For a moment, which couldn't have been more than two seconds, he became unconscious. He was awoken by a jolt and saw that he had hit a street light. He got out of the SUV and in desperation began limping towards Holy Cross, which was now within his sight. After covering several feet, he collapsed due to the weakness. Realizing that he could not make it to the hospital in time, Godbole pulled out his phone from his pocket and tried to call Patil.

The phone rang, but there was no answer. *'Of course, he won't answer. It's past midnight. That b*st*rd must be fast asleep by now.'*

It went to voicemail. With the last of his strength Godbole left a message, "Pramila. It's all because of her. The guy who possesses

other bodies … He's taking revenge for her." saying this Godbole dropped the phone. The irony of dying on an empty street after a car collision wasn't lost on him.

18. *Her Link Board*

Mandana and Ubbhayabharti gave me a very warm welcome. In the span of one-month Mandana had changed completely. He had already accepted me as a Guru in his mind, even though his formal initiation was still pending.

I told Ubbhayabharti that I was prepared for her questions. The debate continued from where it left off, but in less than a day Ubbhayabharti conceded defeat. And so, I formally initiated Mandana as my disciple and Ubbhayabharti agreed to follow me wherever I went.

Nura gave a friendly smile as she proceeded to give the mystery girl a sponge-bath the next morning. The girl's grey eyes wandered all over the bathroom. She was fascinated by the entire two-bedroom apartment at Gupta Bhavan. Compared to the places she was being held captive; the apartment was no less than a palace for her. She felt that the bathroom, in particular, was meant for royalty with its glossy marble tiles and stainless-steel fixtures.

As Nura ran her hands down the girl's back she felt a scar. She leaned in, to get a better look at it. It wasn't a birth-mark or the scars left after an accident. The girl had been branded. Nura was unable to identify it, but it appeared to be an upside-down cone, or maybe a mountain, with a large snake-like figure coiled around it.

Nura let out a silent sigh and went on with the bath.

In the living room Cyrus and Aditi sat across the dining table, sipping green tea. She hated green tea, but since she was trying to switch to a Sattvic diet, she wanted to start by ridding her body of caffeine. Cyrus had hypothesized to her that a diet which was 'purer' would enhance her ability to perform the transferance. She explained to him what happened last night and frowned with disgust after each sip.

"How was it inside the trunk? You were in there for a good four hours."

"Not as bad as I thought. But more than the bottle of water, the flashlight and book which I had carried with me proved to be useful. There was a higher chance of dying of boredom than of dehydration…"

Just then, Nura walked into the room. "The Nine branded her."

"What do you mean 'branded'?" Aditi asked.

"They left a symbol on her by pressing a hot metal on her mark."

Cyrus let out a moan of sympathy while Aditi didn't react. Nura noticed this lack of reaction from Aditi, but said nothing.

"So, what do we do with her?" asked Aditi coolly.

As usual Cyrus was ready with a solution, "I've been thinking… There's this orphanage in Bangalore that takes in children with special needs. We could take her there."

"We can't take her to an orphanage!" Nura snapped.

"It's not a bad place. I've visited it a few times. They treat the kids well. We can also check on her whenever we are around…. And also, what other option do we have?"

Nura lowered her gaze towards the floor. She had to concede that there was no other better alternative. After a long pause Aditi declared, “Then it’s decided. We’ll send the girl to the Bangalore orphanage.”

“I’ll take care of the admission process.” Cyrus assured.

“I’ll come with you.” Nura volunteered.

“We’ll use our overseas funds to make a large donation to the orphanage.” Aditi suggested. The other two nodded.

“Oh!” Nura turned to Cyrus, “I forgot. I wanted you to ask her, her name.”

Cyrus signed the question to the girl who responded. After that there was some more back and forth between them.

“Strange. She says she doesn’t remember her name... and when I asked her who taught her sign language, she said she didn’t remember that either…”

“Wait.” Aditi sighed as she rolled up her sleeves, “Leave this to me.” She closed her eyes. Cyrus held on to her body as it went limp. Six seconds later she was back, “It is strange… She has no memories of what happened beyond the last five days, She doesn’t remember anything at all…”

“Then how did she know her parents had sold her off?” Nura asked.

“The member of the Nine, who was hosting the meeting and keeping her captive, told her so. Something happened to this girl which caused her memories to get erased. The first thing she remembered is waking up in a dark room. She already had the scar on her back and doesn’t remember how she got it.”

Nura felt a gut-wrenching pity for the girl, "It's okay. We'll name her. From today she will be called Navya." Without Nura prompting him, Cyrus signed what she said to the girl. As he was doing so, Aditi left the room, indifferent to what was happening. Nura watched her leave and once she was out of earshot she told Cyrus, "Hey. Haven't you noticed Aditi is acting differently…Like a bit… *emotionless*."

"Now that you mention it, yes. I did. But can you blame her? She killed about ten people last night. She's probably in shock."

"No, I'm not talking about last night or today morning. I've been seeing some signs of it for over a month. She's getting more and more… well… 'inhuman' with time. Her demeanour is becoming more and more stoic with time. It's not that killing ten people made her numb, I think she killed ten people because she became numb…"

"Maybe. But I think you are reading too much into things… if you were in her place last night you would have done the same."

"I know I would! But Aditi wouldn't…" Nura paused, "What if there are side-effects to entering too many bodies?"

"Like what kind of side-effects?"

"Think about it. All those memories, from different people… Yes, they fade over time, but what if they don't fade completely…. What if each time she enters someone, a part of them remains with her?"

"You mean like a part of their soul?"

"No. I don't mean their souls. I mean their memories, their emotions. Just think about the class of people she has been entering. They are some of the worst that mankind has to offer. People can barely live with their own memories. Imagine if you had to carry even a small

part of the memories of hundreds of people. If my theory is correct then that means the more antagonists she enters, the worse she is going to get…"

"Hmmm…. If you are right then…" Cyrus sighed, "Okay, let's talk to Aditi. Let's reduce the missions. Space out the transferances. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Yes. Once we drop off Navya, we'll sit down with her and have an intervention."

Just then Aditi entered the room with a 36"x 20" maroon pin board. It had newspaper cuttings on it with threads of different colours running across the pins. "Johar exposes Patil's involvement in drug trafficking." "NCL undergoing sanitization after multiple scientists complain of momentary lapses in memory."

"What's that?" inquired Cyrus.

"It's my link board. I keep it under my bed. I've been collecting a few news stories to support a theory that I had." Aditi lifted the board and showed it to the others. "That theory was confirmed last night when I scanned Abhijeet Das' memories. That incident where he went on live television and threw truth bombs about those politicians - he had no memory of it. He didn't gain anything from it. It wasn't part of any plan… he did it and later he had no memory of it."

Aditi stood there with a huge grin prompting Cyrus to ask, "Okay, so what theory of yours does that serve?"

She continued to act smug. "Finally, I figured out something before you did, Nura. Frankly, I'm surprised you missed it…"

"What is it?!" Nura asked impatiently

Aditi took a deep breath as she uttered her next words with pride, "There's someone else out there with the same abilities as me."

Cyrus and Nura gaped at her in shock.

19. *His Rage*

While we were camped at Sriveli, a poor Brahmin along with his deaf and dumb son came to visit me. With tears in his eyes, he told me that his son could not speak a word. He was unable to learn the alphabets and therefore could not by any means read the Vedas. I looked at the young boy and asked "Who are you?"

The boy looked me in the eyes and in all earnestness answered, "I am neither human nor God nor animal. I am neither day nor night. I am the Self. I am all. I am the universe."

The boy's father was shocked. He had not understood what the boy said but was just pleasantly surprised that the boy was able to hear the question and speak also. I, on the other hand, was not surprised by the boy's speech but rather by the contents thereof. The Brahmin invited my disciples and myself to his home. There, in front of the boy's mother, the father urged him to speak, but he could not. The father was disappointed and felt that the miracle was only a one-time one. He turned to me. I asked the boy another question, which he answered with utmost fluency and confidence. I turned back to the surprised father and mother and told them "This boy is beyond your understanding. He is not meant to live here. Allow me to take him with me."

The parents were shocked by my request but they finally agreed since it was what was best for the boy. I initiated the boy as my disciple and named him 'Hastamalaka'. Normally, it is the disciples who write commentaries on the words spoken by their

Guru, but in this case, it was I who ended up writing a commentary on the words spoken by Hastamalaka.

Robin reached Sakina Manzil after a long night of work. He was in the body of a bus driver which he entered during eight in the morning and was now on his way back to Mahima's house.

He entered the building as he usually did, on the pretext of making a delivery.

When he exited the elevator on the second floor, he was surprised to see that the door of Mahima's apartment was open.

"Mahima?" he called out as he slowly pushed the door and stuck his head in. On hearing no response, he stepped in. He walked up to the entrance of the kitchen and froze. Mahima and Dante were lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

He rushed to Mahima's body, knowing fully well even before he reached her that she had been dead for hours. *'Who could do this?'* he thought as he hovered over her corpse and placed his hands inches away from the slit on her neck.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a movement. It was Dante. He was still breathing despite having bled substantially. Robin went to him and studied the multiple wounds on his back. He grabbed a blanket from the bedroom and wrapped Dante in it. He lifted Dante in his arms. Before he left the kitchen, he had a *déjà vu* moment. For the second time in his life, he turned back to get a glimpse of a recently deceased loved one, before scurrying away, leaving the door open.

Two factors worked in Robin's favour. One, was that Mishra - the night-watchman of Sakina Manzil, was pretty lackadaisical and was in the least alarmed by the sight of a strange man running out the

building with a dog in a blanket. The other was that there was a vet just two buildings away.

The clinic had just opened for the day when Robin barged in begging for help. The doctor, an elderly fellow, and the middle-aged nurse were both extremely co-operative. They enquired as to who inflicted Dante wounds, he simply stated the truth that he had found him that way.

The doctor tended to the wounds and gave Dante some tranquilizer for the pain. Dante was to be kept under observation for at least the rest of the day.

Robin thanked the doctor and paid him his fee. The doctor told him he could leave if he wished and come back later in the afternoon to pick Dante up. Robin declined. He waited till the evening when the tranquilizers had worn off.

"Say hello." said the doctor, as he opened the door and introduced Robin to Dante who was now awake and resting on a cushion on the floor. Robin understood that apart from weakness brought on by the injuries, Dante was also depressed because he had deduced that Mahima was no more. He petted Dante softly. Dante did not react.

"He doesn't have the energy to walk for now but he will be fine after a few days of rest. Bring him back in two days for just a follow up. Here is a prescription for some painkillers."

"Thank you. Do you know any pet-friendly hotels nearby where we can stay tonight?"

Robin checked into one of the hotels recommended by the vet and carefully placed Dante on the bed. Once Dante fell asleep, he left.

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Robin walked around the gate of Sakina Manzil, waiting for an escaping episode. There was no commotion in the building, meaning that nobody had discovered Mahima's body yet. Although he had left the door open, nobody else lived on that floor since the only other flat on that floor was Robin's old house.

After ninety minutes of waiting, he began feeling the tremors. He ran towards Mishra who raised his hand in defense. The moment Robin touched Mishra's arm, he was flooded with his memories. However, the watchman did not have any relevant memory of anybody suspicious entering the building last night… Once the memories were over, Robin was left watching the confused bus driver in front of him.

"What are you doing here? Get out!" he shouted at the driver.

"Where… where am I?"

"Go get high somewhere else, druggie. Now get out from here!"

The disoriented bus driver left.

Inside the watchman's cabin was a cheap computer, which had access to the CCTV footage at the gate of the building. He rewinded the footage to last night. After fast forwarding hours of footage, he finally came across a familiar looking man entering the building. He fast forwarded it further to find, to his shock, the same man leaving an hour later with a limp and with his clothes all bloodied.

Robin zoomed in on the face of the man and thought hard where he had seen him before. Then it struck him. He had come across the face of the man when researching on Patil. The man was working under

him. *'But how did he find me? And there was no sign of the door being broken open. Why would Mahima allow him in?'*

There were a lot of questions to be answered. But the time for games was over. *'It's time I put an end to Patil and his underlings.'*

20. *Their Meeting*

I was walking along the Tungabadra river at Sringa Giri, when I came across a rare sight. A pregnant frog was delivering her offspring in the scorching heat. A cobra, which was the frog's natural enemy, had placed its head above the frog and provided shade. I knew that this was a sign.

I set up a temple and monastery at that very spot. I stayed there for several years writing books. A young man called Giri, who was illiterate, devoted himself in service to me and my disciples. Whenever I delivered my sermons to my disciples on the religious scriptures, Giri would sit near me and listen attentively.

One day, as I was sitting quietly the disciples gathered around me for the sermon. When I continued to be silent, they requested me to commence with the lessons of the day. I replied, "Giri is not here yet. Let us wait for him." The other disciples were taken aback. They never saw Giri as a person of any significance. They were all learned and Giri could barely even spell his own name. One of my disciples replied, "O Guruji! Giri is a nice boy. But what is the point in letting him listen to your lessons? Is he capable of understanding the scriptures which we have studied for years? To deliver your sermon to him is the same as delivering it to the walls." Before I could respond, Giri walked in and so I began my sermon.

One evening, as Giri was returning back, after washing my garments in the nearby river, he started singing a song about me and my teachings. The people around heard this song which was

in Sanskrit and filled with deep meaning. Soon, the song spread far and wide, along with the message contained in it. My disciples started respecting Giri.

It was not long before I initiated Giri in Sanyasa.

The security at Patil's Nagpur villa was tighter than ever. There were over a dozen security guards and only three servants, – a cook, a maid and a nanny. Patil's wife and daughter – Jharna and Shreya felt that he had gone insane. He had directed his other servants and support staff to remain at his Mumbai house. The drivers were given a leave. In fact, Patil had himself driven his family to Nagpur, despite never having driven in decades.

The staff and security guards were prohibited from coming within fifteen feet of each other, any of Patil's family members and anyone in the outside world. They were warned that any contravention of this rule would lead to immediate termination of their employment. The only exception was the nanny, Brenda D'souza, who was constantly with Shreya and as a result had her meals with the family.

Vegetables, fruits and other groceries were delivered once a week. The delivery boys would bring the van inside the gate, unload the supplies on the porch and then leave. All payments were made online, so as to avoid contact with the delivery boys.

Each and every person in the house had a walkie-talkie to communicate with each other. The cook would prepare the meal and place them on the dining table. Then he would intimate the family about the same and leave before they could arrive. Serving food to the family was easy. The problem was serving each guard and the maid individually. Since the guards were prevented from coming near each other, he had to place their food at fixed spots around the house and

the adjoining garden, from where they would pick it up during their respective meal breaks.

Patil himself refused to meet with any visitors or leave the house and forbade his wife and daughter from doing so as well. If Jharna, Shreya and Brenda did not come out to the garden every evening, the staff and security would not even know if they were living in the house. Patil on the other hand avoided even going to the garden. The only interactions he had with the outside world was via phone. The staff did not know the reason for the strict rules. The maid assumed that the family had contracted some kind of contagious disease and directed that social distance be maintained to avoid any spread of the disease. Thus, she was more than willing to follow the social distancing rules set out.

One of the guards had a theory that Patil had died and that the family was covering it up for some reason. He believed the voice they heard over the walkie-talkie was not of Patil, but an impostor.

It had been two weeks since they had been functioning in that uncanny manner. Two weeks of them not leaving the premises or talking to any other human being in-person. In order to prevent the staff from opposing the harsh working conditions and quitting their jobs, Jharna arranged for cigarettes and alcohol to be delivered at their door-step along with the weekly deliveries of groceries. While this did pacify the guards and servants to some extent, Jharna herself was thoroughly harrowed as Patil continued to keep her in the dark. Despite repeated requests, she did not get any explanation for why he was putting the family through that ordeal. In fact, when she asked whether it was because prominent persons like Dharamguru and

Daruwala had disappeared, he denied it, which added to her confusion.

"Why won't you just tell me honestly what's going on? I'll do my best to understand." She pleaded with Patil for the nth time, "You are sleeping in a different room. You aren't allowing Shreya or me to touch you. What is going on?!"

Patil ignored her and continued to stare out the window of their bedroom, on the third floor of the villa. He very much wanted to tell her the truth. But how could he? How could he tell her about the message that Godbole left him a week back just before his death, or that he genuinely believed in the existence of a man who could possess other bodies and that such a man was out to get him.

"Why are you ignoring me?!" she shouted.

"Why is that child standing there?" he mumbled to himself as he continued to stare out the window.

Jharna walked towards the window and stood beside him. "Which child?"

"The one across the street."

Her eyes turned to the direction in which Patil pointed and indeed there was a young child, who could not be over seven years old, standing on the sidewalk across the villa. His clothes were torn, old and dusty. He was clearly raised on the street. Jharna grew furious. "Don't try to change the topic! I want to know why-"

"I have been watching him for over twenty minutes. He has been studying the villa carefully for some time now."

"So, what if he has? He's just a boy. How does it matter?"

To Patil it mattered greatly. He picked up the walkie-talkie from the lamp table next to him and spoke into it, "Listen, there is this boy outside the villa. Shoo him away."

"Why are you shooing away the poor boy?" his wife objected. "What has gotten into you?"

Meanwhile the guard at the gate shouted at the boy from inside the cabin next to the gate. He threatened to hit the boy with his stick.

Robin, who was in the boy, didn't move. He wanted to see whether the guard would actually leave the premises and come towards him. But for almost two minutes the guard just yelled and didn't even open his window to do so. Robin understood that the guard would not come out in any circumstance and so he walked away.

He had been keeping an eye on the villa for over a week now, and had come to the conclusion that it was impregnable. The scope of touching anybody inside was itself seemingly impossible. But timing the touch in such a way that it synced with his escaping episode was beyond impossible.

'Maybe I should just wait it out. He can't be in there forever. But who knows how long I have either? No, I need to find a way to end this quickly. But I don't think I can do it by purely relying on my special abilities. I'll have to sneak in using "normal" and old-fashioned methods.'

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That evening the grocery van arrived at Patil's villa at 4.30 p.m. to drop off the week's supplies. The gate was opened and the van was allowed to back up inside. Once the van was inside the drivers got off, opened the back and unloaded the groceries. Two guards kept a careful watch over the unloading operations from afar. Unbeknownst

to them a child had gone underneath the van before it entered the gate and held on to its undercarriage. When the van was allowed inside, the boy was also granted access. While the guards focused on the rear of the van, he crawled out from underneath the front and ran into the bushes adjacent to the gatekeeper's cabin.

He laid on the ground with his legs curled up. He could hear the sound of the van leaving. Robin did feel guilty about using a young boy for such a risky endeavour but he was left with no choice. If he missed that Monday's delivery, he would have to wait another week.

There he lied, in broad daylight, just waiting for an episode, which was expected to take place in a couple of hours. It was a stressful situation and every little sound alarmed him.

His plan was simple. Once he began getting an episode he would run towards the gatekeeper's cabin and touch the guard on duty. Once inside the guard he would pick up the boy and, through the cabin window, would place him back on the road.

After about four hours of hiding in the bushes, he felt the much-awaited tremors building up inside him. Without wasting any time to check his surroundings, he ran straight to the cabin door, but was shocked to find that it had locked from the inside. *'A miscalculation… What should I do? Should I knock and hope that they open it? Or should I search for someone else? I don't have much time. I better knock.'* He knocked on the door, but from within came a voice asking "Who is it?" Robin's tremors were getting uncontrollable *'What do I say? How do I get him to open it quickly? Time is running out. I better search for someone instead.'* As he turned, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Within seconds, he absorbed the memories of Shreya's nanny - Brenda D'souza, and then was left looking down at the small boy. And as luck would have it, just at that moment, the gatekeeper opened the door.

"What's happening here?" he demanded an explanation from the nanny to justify the presence of the unknown boy in the premises.

"I found this boy playing in the bushes." Robin said.

"How did he get in?"

"I don't have any idea."

The gatekeeper held the boy by the shoulders. "How did you come inside?"

The boy was speechless and began crying.

"Listen." Robin told him, "Just let him go. It doesn't matter how he got in. But if Patil sir finds out about this we will all be in trouble."

"Patil sir has given us strict instructions to alert him of any breaches in the security" saying that he pulled out the walkie-talkie which was fastened to his belt.

"And how do you think he will react when you tell him that your team is so incompetent that an infant could bypass all of you? Besides, you know that breach of the distancing rule will lead to termination of employment, and just see how close you and I are standing to each other. Do you want both of us to get fired?" The gatekeeper put down his walkie-talkie. "He's just a boy." Robin continued, "He's no longer a threat. Just drop him outside through your cabin window. If we take him to Patil sir, then who knows what sir will do to him."

The gatekeeper thought for a second, then he quickly scanned the area to make sure nobody was watching. Once he was certain the coast was

clear he opened the window behind him, picked up the crying boy and placed him outside carefully. The boy immediately ran off.

The gatekeeper shut the cabin door without uttering another word to the nanny.

Robin heard a sound coming from inside the pocket of his frock. "Dinner is served. I repeat, dinner is served." He pulled out the walkie-talkie and heard other voices that followed.

"Jharna here. Understood."

"Shreya here. Understood."

"Patil here. Understood."

After a pause the first voice came on again. "Brenda, dinner is ready, please respond."

Robin quickly hit the 'Talk' button. "Brenda here. Understood."

He proceeded inside the house. The three-storied villa was pretty dull and ordinary, unlike Patil's lavish Mumbai bungalow. Robin believed that it acted more like a pied-à-terre where Patil could conduct his illicit activities away from the prying eyes of his wife.

Once Robin entered the dining room, he found Jharna and Shreya already sitting at the table. Jharna was a loving mother, who was oblivious of her husband's immoral actions and schemes. Shreya was a joyous seven-year-old girl with two pony-tails. From Brenda's memories Robin learnt that despite her family's wealth Jharna took joy in simple activities such as colouring with crayons, plucking flowers and creating soap bubbles.

The plates were already set and the dishes were placed on the centre of the table. The chair at the head of the table was empty.

"Come Brenda." Jharna beckoned him to sit next to Shreya who was opposite her. "Sir will be joining us in five minutes."

Jharna enquired with Shreya on how she spent her morning. Shreya responded that she had done some fingerprinting under Brenda's supervision. Robin had a flashback, of dipping Astrid's palms in food colouring and pressing it on a white sheet of paper. The same sheet of paper was stuck to the walls of his bedroom.

"Did you wash your hands properly?"

"Yes, mummy."

At that moment the door was opened and inside came the man who Robin had loathed most. Patil wore an expression of utmost contempt, as took a seat at the head of the table. The conversation in the room came to a grinding halt. As Robin had already discovered while scanning Brenda's memories, the family maintained a sombre air whenever Patil was around, especially when persons outside the family were present. Despite Brenda working with them for over eight years, Patil barely spoke or even made eye-contact with her.

Robin felt a burning sensation from within. The man he wanted to kill was merely two feet away from him. If he wanted, he could pick up a knife from the table and finish off Patil then and there. But he couldn't put Shreya through that, nor could he let Brenda be convicted for murder.

"Give me some *daal*[13]." Patil ordered to no one in particular.

[13] A form of lentil soup, prepared with tomatoes, onions and various spices. It is often eaten along with rice.

The *daal* bowl was next to Robin. He picked it up, stood from his chair and walked up to Patil's chair so that he could serve him.

With each spoonful of *daal* he poured his contempt for Patil rose, as if he was filling his own rage, one spoon at a time. But he restrained himself. *'Enjoy your last few hours in this world. Your death will not be at the hands of this woman. There is only one person destined to kill you and that is you yourself.'*

***

The rest of the dinner was rather uneventful. Robin, still in Brenda's body, played with Shreya and gossiped with Jharna, a bit. He retired to bed at about 10 pm. The nanny was allotted a 20 feet by 10 feet room in the basement, which contained one cupboard, a bed, a desk and a chair. Robin plopped on the bed having had an exhausting day. It felt like it had been ages since he last took care of a child.

Despite his physical exhaustion, he was unable to sleep. His mind wandered to thoughts about Patil, Shreya and even about Dante, who was presently living and being looked after by a dog-sitter who he had found online and hired.

As Robin was struggling to sleep, he heard a knock on the door. *'Who could that be?'*

He opened the door to find the cook with a plate of samosas.

"Hi, I just whipped up some samosas. Will you help me finish them?"

Robin went through Brenda's memories and there was no precedence of the cook doing any gesture remotely similar to this for Brenda. This was also the first time he ever dared to breach the distancing rules in place. He didn't know how to read the situation. *'Has he developed a crush on Brenda? Do I dismiss him? Or do I entertain him? One the one*

hand, if caught with him, Brenda could be fired. On the other hand, I might be able to get some relevant information out of him.'

"Sure. Come in." Robin made way for the cook. The cook handed him the plate and then bent down to pick up a large red suitcase placed next to him, which Robin had not noticed up till that point. "What's in the suitcase?"

As the cook entered the room, Robin felt a warmth emitting from him. He didn't know how to describe it, but it seemed like positivity was leaking from his body. "Close the door."

The situation was getting fishier and fishier. But Robin complied. The cook then extended his hand forward for a shake. Robin returned the gesture while still holding the plate of samosas with his other hand.

As he shook hands with Robin, the cook with the calmest of demeanours said "Nice to meet you, Robin."

Robin's jaw dropped. He almost dropped the plate he was holding.

"Don't worry. I come in peace. I'm Aditi Mukherjee. It's good to finally meet you."

21. *Their Discourse*

As I was meditating under a peepal tree one morning, I felt a sudden tug. I knew that it was my mother who was thinking about me while on her death-bed. I travelled back to Kaladi in haste in order to fulfill the promise I had made to her.

When she saw me, my mother was both happy and disappointed. She was unable to speak properly, but I was able to read her thoughts in which she told me "You have changed so much! I have been hearing of all the good work that you have been doing. I knew you would come to me if I were to think of you. Therefore, I tried not to think about you. I did not want to disturb you. But alas, I could not put you out of my mind. Why did you leave your work and come?"

I responded to my mother's thoughts and said, "O Mother! In our scripture's mothers occupy a position which is higher than the Gods. How could I not come to you? Now that you are breathing your last, please know that I do not regret choosing this path. I tried living the life you wanted me to live for an entire month. I lived as a King! But I could not find peace and tranquility there. One can only find true happiness when they look inward instead of outward."

I do not think that my mother was able to comprehend everything I had said, but nonetheless she took pleasure in listening to my voice. She took one final breath and then died with a content expression on her face.

Aditi, who was still possessing the body of the cook, and Robin, who was still possessing Brenda, were sitting on the floor, chatting over a plate of samosas kept atop her suitcase, which was laying in front of them. They both discussed their respective abilities. They spoke about the time they could both spend in other bodies and about the first body they ever entered. Aditi also explained to him how she entered Patil's premises by being inside the driver of the grocery van while her own body was inside the van, in a red suitcase. Just when the dickey of the van was opened, she entered the body of the security guard who was unloading it. Once she kept the red suitcase in the kitchen, she re-entered her own body. About half an hour back, the cook, while preparing samosas, decided to see what was in the conspicuous suitcase. As soon as he began unzipping it, Aditi entered the body of the cook and then brought a plate of the samosas for Robin. She also admitted to Robin that it was much easier for her to enter the premises than it was for him, since she is able to switch between bodies at will.

Aditi told Robin that she already knew about his accident and his current motive to bring down Patil, which she inferred from news reports. She also told him about Nura and Cyrus and the kind of missions they carried out. Aditi explained how they reached the building when Mahima's dead body was discovered, and how like Robin they too analysed the CCTV footage. Nura had deduced that it was Patil's man Friday, Godole, who killed her. Aditi also informed Robin that it was reported in the local papers that Godbole had died in an accident – a fact which Robin was unaware of.

They both were very casual with each other and felt a certain relief of finally being able to talk to someone else who has shared similar experiences. Aditi confessed to Robin that she had become

emotionally numb because she was performing the transferance too frequently. She told him how Cyrus and Nura sat her down and told her to keep longer intervals between each transferance. Their idea had worked and she was beginning to feel a bit less numb.

"So, wait, there is a limit to the distance you can be away from your own body?"

"Yes, the farther away I go from my actual body the less time I have in the vessel I enter."

"Vessel?"

"We call the bodies I possess 'vessels'."

"Transferance?"

Aditi chuckled, "We call the ability to transfer my soul to another body 'transferance'."

"It seems you guys spend a lot of time coming up with names for things."

Aditi shrugged her shoulders.

"Wait. Then where is your actual body right now?"

Aditi patted the suitcase which was before them, which left Robin with his samosa-filled mouth open.

"Don't believe me?" She set the plate of samosa aside and unzipped the bag. She flung open the lid to reveal her body lying serenely inside with a tiny bottle of water. After that sight Robin found it hard to swallow the bite of samosa he had taken.

Despite being a scientist and having a curious mind, he was never too keen to know about the origin of his abilities. His quest for vengeance

had overpowered his faculties. However, after meeting Aditi, his mind began questioning everything about his current state. “Do you have any idea where our abilities come from?” he asked as she shut the suitcase.

“My colleague Nura and I had initially discussed it extensively, but we weren’t able to reach a consensus. We stopped trying to find out the origins of our powers since it’s kind of a moot discussion. Does it matter where they came from or does it matter what we are meant to do with them? My boyfriend Cyrus thinks that our ‘souls’ are possessing other vessels. I didn’t agree until I learnt about you. Your original body is destroyed, including your brain. It seems unlikely that it’s your consciousness or mind that is possessing other people, it’s probably your soul.”

“Mahima believed it was my soul that remained as well. thought that the reason my soul was allowed to remain behind was because I had some ‘unfinished business’.”

“I don’t mean to diminish the significance of your mission but I can with confidence say that your powers weren’t given to you by a higher being just so that you could carry out your revenge. A lot of people die with unfinished business. Some have it much worse than you. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I agree. Then what do you think makes you and me different from others? And why are your and my abilities so different yet similar?”

“Okay… So, let’s start with your second question. What are the differences in our powers? I need to go into a deep meditative state to enter another vessel. Initially, I could not spend more than a few minutes in a vessel. It took me a lot of training to be able to spend

three hours in them. Even then, the farther I took the vessel away from my own body, the less time I had in it… Now let's contrast that with your powers… You don't need to meditate; you could spend nine hours in a vessel but after that you get expelled from that vessel by force. Your abilities are so different from mine that they can barely be said to be the same, agree?"

Robin nodded.

"But they are the same, I tell you. The differences in our powers comes from the fact that you don't have your original body while I do. This is my hypothesis – If I am in a vessel and my original body perishes at that time, my powers would be exactly the same as yours, think about it. I'm limited by time and distance only because my actual body keeps trying to pull my soul back. A body has a bond with its soul. As long as they both exist simultaneously, they will always try to reunite. If I remove my body from the equation, I can travel any distance in a vessel."

"Okay… then how do you explain that my soul remained even after I died? If your and my powers are essentially the same, do you think your soul would also remain behind after your body dies?"

"I don't think your soul was in your body at the moment when you died. Tell me, do you remember running into that tree? What is the last thing you remember when you were in your actual body?"

"The last thing I remember was skidding off the road. I might have seen the tree from afar, but I don't remember approaching it."

"Then that confirms my theory. Moments before the collision you were able to perform the transferance. During your near death experience your mind reached the state required to perform it. The

state of mind which I myself can only achieve by meditation. It was an absolute fluke, but you pulled it off. Even the first two times I performed the transferance, it was by accident… I mean I was meditating, but I didn't make a conscious effort to enter another body. So, to answer your question, I don't think there is any way that my soul could stay back if it were in my original body at the time of my death. However, if while I was occupying another vessel and at that time my body got damaged to such an extent that it could no longer be considered fit for occupation by a soul, then yes, I think I would continue to live on, hopping from bodies just like you. And like I said, our powers would exactly be the same."

"Okay… but does that mean that anyone can perform the 'Transferance'? That there isn't anything unique about us?"

"Yes and no. I don't think anybody can perform the transferance. It would be statistically impossible that only you and I were able invoke the powers, when billions of others also had the potential to do so. No, I don't think everyone is capable of doing it, but I do think it is possible that there are many others who have the potential but haven't been able to tap into it…"

"Then what is that criteria that differentiates people who have the potential from people who don't?"

"That's the question, isn't it? Even I can't say about it. Possibly something common in our genes, or maybe something else that we don't quite understand yet…" Aditi looked Robin in the eyes and understood what he was trying to hint, "No, I don't think we were chosen by a higher power."

"Let's agree to disagree." There was a moment of silence during which Aditi waited for Robin to ask any other questions he had. "But if I accept your theory then why do I get escaping episodes? Since my original body is destroyed, shouldn't that mean that I can spend unlimited time in another body, as there isn't anybody trying to reunite with my soul?"

"Your escaping episodes aren't caused by attraction, but by repulsion. A body cannot sustain two souls at the same time for too long. It will eventually reject, or rather 'eject' one, and of course the one it will be the one it is not bonded with."

"Okay. But why do I need to touch another body to enter it when you don't have to?"

"Do you? Have you ever tried not touching a body when you have an episode?"

"No… I mean it's not really a choice, I get tremors and my body involuntarily reaches out to the person closest to me."

"Precisely. I don't think you need to touch anybody at all. The body reacts involuntarily at the behest of your soul which cannot exist in this world without a body. But I believe that even if you were unable to touch anybody, as long as somebody is in the vicinity, your soul will enter the body of the person closest to you." She raised her eyebrows and added a caveat, "Of course, it's just a theory so don't try to experiment with it."

Once again there was silence. Aditi's eyes filled with hope as she uttered these next words - "You know we can learn a lot more about our powers, if we work together…"

He was mildly surprised by the statement "Together?"

"Yes, I want you to join us. I already told you about all the good we do and with both of us working together who knows what we can achieve. It would be an honour to work alongside you to make the world a better place."

Robin thought about the offer for a while, "To be honest I didn't think about what I would do after killing Patil. But after living like *this* for the past four weeks, I have decided to leave this world. I can't continue like this, shifting from one body to another. It takes a toll on me and I desperately need some peace. Once I am done here, the next time I have an escaping episode, I'm not going to touch anybody. I'm going to let my soul depart."

"Robin, I can help you control your powers. With time my friends and I might also be able to find a way for you to permanently be in another vessel. But I urge you to soldier on. It's true that I don't think we were specially chosen to be given these powers, but I do think we need to make the best of them." Saying this she placed her hand on his arm. Robin felt the warmth flowing from her hand to his and into his chest. *'What is this?'* he thought to himself *'There is something about her because of which I trust her… and I don't trust people easily… I have barely known her for an hour, and yet I am inclined to believe everything she is saying. What is it about her? It's definitely not her appearance or tone of voice since this is not her actual body. Is it something about her personality? Perhaps… But it is something else as well… She radiates warmth and hope. It's as if she has this aura around her. Yes… that would be the best way to describe it, she has an aura around her… one which invokes feelings of love and respect. I must pull myself out of this trance I am under.'*

"I'm sorry" he said regretfully as he turned his face away, to avoid her gaze. "But I can't. I wish you and your friends my best."

For a second Aditi felt crestfallen, but then immediately recovered with a smile. “No need to be sorry. I understand. In case you change your mind, you can call me on this number ….” She handed him a small piece of paper, “Oh, it’s almost 11.30 p.m. My time in this body is almost up. I better leave. I only came here to meet the only other person with the same powers as mine. And it was a pleasure meeting you. You have given me the opportunity to learn a lot about the nature of my own powers.”

She stood up, picked up the suitcase and turned to leave. As she turned, Robin had the feeling that it was a close family member who he was saying goodbye to forever.

“Wait... Your ‘no killing’ policy which you told me about…”

“Yeah?”

“You aren’t going to stop me from killing Patil?”

Aditi sighed. “You have suffered a great loss. Sometimes I think about people who have faced tragedy such as you, my friend Nura, and even a very young girl I met recently….How do you guys find the strength to overcome it? I have never experienced the kind of loss or pain that you guys have… So I don’t think I am in a position to judge your actions. I am against killing and so is Nura. However, it’s a self-rule. Neither of us have gone through what you have… You follow your code and we will follow ours… Besides I don’t think I could stop you even if I wanted to…” saying this she opened the door and left.

The number of lights that were in the room remained the same, yet it seemed to have gotten just a shade darker, and the paint on the walls seemed to have dulled.

22. *Their Visit to the Park*

The villagers of Kaladi came to pay respects to my mother. In front of all of them I declared that I would be performing my mother's funeral rites.

"How can you? You are an ascetic. You renounced all ties with others when you took up the life of a Sanyasa. You are no longer the son of that woman. Therefore, you have no right to conduct her last rites. We will not permit this. You will give all Brahmins a bad name."

I tried to convince the villagers that by performing my mother's funeral rites, I did not breach the vow that I had taken. But they were not ready to listen to reason. They walked away in fury and refrained from helping me in preparing for the funeral ceremony or participating in it.

I had travelled far and wide and brought even my most ardent opponents to see my way of life as the one true way of life. Yet, when it came to convincing the villagers, I had failed miserably. This re-affirmed something I already knew – it is easier to bring the staunchest properly educated opponent on your side than to bring an ignorant one on your side.

As my mother's body was being engulfed in the flames of the funeral pyre, I saw my mother's soul escaping her body and moving upward. A crow, the carriers of souls to heaven, quickly caught it. I quickly placed some rice on the ground, as an offering to the crow. The crow ate the rice. I requested the crow to safely take my mother's soul to the other realm. The crow then flew away.

Meeting with Aditi invigorated Robin. He decided to bump up his plan of executing Patil. As per his estimation, he was going to have an escaping episode at about 3.30 a.m. There was no point entering the body of the other staff members since they weren't let anywhere close to Patil. And it wasn't impossible to go to Patil and Jharna's room in the middle of the night since their room on the third floor was guarded by guards who weren't allowed to get anywhere close to Patil themselves. There was only one other option…

Robin left the room at about 1 pm and climbed up the stairs to the first floor, where Shreya's room was. There were no guards on the first floor. He slowly opened the door and peeked inside. Shreya was sound asleep, holding a Peppa Pig soft toy in her arms. Robin entered and closed the door behind him. He tiptoed towards the bed and sat next to Shreya. 'This is the part I hate the most… the waiting…'

An hour later, Robin felt an all too familiar feeling. He lightly tapped Shreya on the forehead, and as expected he was flooded with Shreya's memories. What he didn't expect was that in Shreya's memories, Patil wasn't that bad a father. He was strict but there were moments of sacrifices which reflected that he truly loved and cared for her. *'It seems that even monsters have hearts when it comes to family.'* he thought to himself.

When the memories were done, he was witnessing a flummoxed Brenda.

"Brenda, please let me sleep."

"How did I get here?"

"I don't know. I think you were sleep-walking."

"Really?! I've never done that before."

"Can we talk tomorrow? I'm very sleepy."

"Oh yes, of course darling. I'm sorry for waking you up."

After Brenda left, Robin played another type of waiting game.

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Next day morning, Robin followed Shreya's usual morning routine. The only thing he was looking forward to was lunch-time. *'I just hope the timing works out fine. If lunch is anything similar to dinner, then Shreya and Patil will be at the lunch table together for only a little over half an hour. I have to get an episode at that time.'*

After doing some math and geography lessons with Brenda, the entire morning, in the afternoon a voice came from both of their walkie-talkies in the afternoon.

"Lunch is served. I repeat, lunch is served." Both of them confirmed their presence on the walkie-talkies.

Brenda accompanied Shreya to the dining room, where, just like last night, the food was already placed on the table. Jharna arrived shortly after they did. They waited for the patriarch to join, so that they could begin. Patil walked in, and without making eye contact with anyone else at the table, he lifted a *chappati*[14] and began to break it. The rest of them commenced their lunch as well.

Robin looked at the clock. It was 12.45 p.m. and Patil was having his *shrikhand*[15] dessert. *'Come on. When is an episode when I need one?'* Robin was getting restless. Patil was wiping his mouth with a napkin and was about to rise.

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[14] A staple flatbread in India.
[15] Indian sweet dish made of yoghurt.

"Daddy, will you play with me today?"

The others at the table were taken aback by this uncharacteristic question.

"No. You know the rules, my child. You can play with your mother. Daddy has work to do."

"Please, Daddy! It's been so many days you haven't talked to me..."

"I said, no!" saying this Patil rose and made his way slowly towards the door. Robin lost hope. But just then, he felt something. *'Yes! I have to act now!'* He jumped off the chair and chased after Patil. Brenda and Jharna shouted behind her to stop. Patil had given strict instructions that no one was permitted to touch him. Not even Shreya or Jharna. Before Patil could react, Shreya tapped his behind.

***

"Hello, sir." Pramila said as she placed her duffle bag filled with cash on the table. They were in his study which was on the ground floor of the Nashik villa. Godbole was standing next to Patil, chewing on *paan*.

"Hello!" Patil greeted her. "Godbole, why don't you take this to the other room and count it. Would you like some wine, dear?"

Pramila agreed. He poured her a glass and one for himself. They moved to the sofa, on his suggestion. Glasses were re-filled numerous times. The two of them cajoled and laughed for over half-an-hour. There seemed to be an attraction forming, in small increments. Before they both knew it, he leaned in for a kiss. There was no resistance.

"Do you want to go upstairs?"

"Sure." She said after two seconds of hesitation.

***

"What did you do?!" Patil fumed at Godbole.

"I had no option. She had to be taken care of."

"I did not tell you to do that."

"She came to me insisting to meet you. After I refused repeatedly, she said she was pregnant with your child. What was I supposed to do?"

"You are supposed to come to me! I could have paid her off or calmed her down."

"She wasn't interested in money or exposing you. She just wanted to let you know that she decided to keep the child and that she would not tell anyone that it was yours."

"What?! Then what was the point of killing her?"

"That was clearly a power-play. How could we trust her? She could come out with the truth in future. Till now she had no proof that the kid she was going to give birth to was yours. But after the kid was born, what if she went on the media and insisted on a paternity test? She would have undeniable proof and your political career would be over."

"Why did you have to kill off the husband and their daughter?"

"There was no other way. I did it as quickly and cleanly as I could. And the reason I did it without asking you was because I didn't want you to worry. I only wanted to come to you after the problem was solved."

***

Several other memories passed through. Patil engaging prostitutes, taking bribes, blackmailing his competition and even holding Shreya as a baby. He chose a wife whose family influence and money would uplift his political career. But his love for his daughter was genuine.

'So, it was consensual.' Robin thought to himself, *'That means Pramila lied to Celine. Does it mean that she didn't love me? And here, I was about to kill this man, thinking he raped my wife and had my family killed. But he didn't. Yes, he has committed other crimes and deserves to be punished, but he does not deserve to be killed…'*

He turned around. Shreya was wondering why she was touching her father. Jharna and Brenda were waiting for Patil to yell in fury. To their surprise, he quietly walks out of the room.

Robin spent the rest of the day contemplating how he had been wasting his time. He began to doubt Pramila's love and pondered as to what was the purpose for which he was allowed to live. *'Is this some cruel joke you are playing on me, God?'* He looked upward, and when no answer came, he decided to pack up the entire affair. He pulled out his phone and typed out a detailed confession of all his crimes which he then emailed to members of the CBI and a few journalists. The idea of sending an email confession was one that Aditi had given him. After the email was sent, he declared into his walkie-talkie, "The social distancing protocols have come to an end. I repeat, the protocol of social distancing is over. You may meet with each other."

After a few seconds, there were sounds of joy and laughter coming from outside. The guards who had not spoken face to face in years were embracing each other fooling around. Jharna barged inside, "Are you serious?"

Robin nodded. She gave him a tight hug.

***

At 9.15 p.m. Robin left the villa for a walk. He instructed Patil's security detail to stay behind. He walked for over half-an-hour, until he finally felt a tremor… A fit teenager who had a football under one of his arms, was passing by. He wore an orange jersey and Bermuda shorts. Robin tapped his shoulder.

The boy dropped the football and ran. By the time Patil was able to realize what had just happened, it was too late…

***

Robin, who was still in the football player's body, travelled back to Mumbai in a bus, after picking up Dante. He decided that he wanted to end his life on his terms and at the place he felt happiest. As he walked from the bus stop to Jogger's Park, he passed by an electronic store where he saw footage of Patil being arrested based on certain evidence that they found with the help of his own email. Robin felt a bit happy as he watched that footage. But it was not the pleasure that came from exacting revenge, but rather the joy that came from dealing out justice. He finally understood what Aditi was talking about.

He thought about contacting her and thanking her for reaching out and bid her farewell. He reached for his pocket to pull out Aditi's contact details, but realized that he left the tiny piece of paper she gave him in the pockets of Brenda's frock. And so he continued his walk, along with Dante.

It was 6 a.m. and Jogger's Park had just opened to the public. There were people doing Tai chi, jogging and just walking. Robin saw an empty bench in a slightly secluded part of the park, and felt that it was an excellent spot. He sat there as Dante went off to chase after some

squirrel. He looked back at all his original memories - painting the house with his wife, holding Astrid in his arms for the first time and learning how to play Mahjong from Mahima. He decided to remember his wife and daughter at their best. He repressed the resentment that he bore towards his wife. Robin told himself that just because Pramila had an impulsive moment in which she lost her self-control and gave in to a physical desire, that did not make her a bad person or a bad wife. And for the first time since his body was destroyed, Robin felt at peace. There was no longer any hatred within him. He said a small prayer that the souls of his family and of Mahima were at peace. He closed his eyes, in quiet contemplation, waiting for the inevitable episode, when he heard someone say "Hi". He opened his eyes. Before him was a pretty girl with brown eyes and sparkling amber hair.

"Hi." He said back, a bit disappointed by the interruption.

She sat next to him on the bench, "My name is Nura Gafoor. I'm a friend of Aditi's."

He was taken aback. "A friend of Aditi's? How did you find me?"

"I've been following you since Nashik. I was watching Patil as he left the house. Obviously, it had to be you, the real Patil wouldn't have just broken the protocols he set himself. Then, I caught the moment when you first made contact with another person. Good choice picking someone so fit, by the way. Made it easier to run away from Patil as soon as you made the switch from his body to this one…. Anyways, after that I followed you on the bus till here."

"But why?"

"I just wanted to see what you were up to. As it is, I was in Bangalore to drop a girl off, so Nashik was kind of on the way."

"You followed me for over nine hours just to see what I was up to?"

"Sounds like stalking, I know. But I just needed to understand what your intentions were. Tell me, why didn't you kill Patil?"

"It's a long story. Frankly, I don't want to talk about it."

"That's okay…I'm not sure if Aditi influenced your decision, but I like to think that she did… I had a theory that performing the transferance repeatedly was making her. Well, In any case, I'm glad I was proven wrong..." she sighed, "What are you waiting for here?"

"Just waiting for my time to come. I thought I was left behind for a purpose. But I had deluded myself. What happened to me was random, and I tried to make meaning of something that wasn't there. I should have died in that collision. After that day, I had no real reason to live."

"We can give you one…"

"Aditi already tried to sell me the idea of joining you guys…But I'm exhausted… Switching bodies every nine hours without being able to have any control over it, it just takes too much out of me…"

"What if we find a way to solve that problem like Aditi suggested? Aditi, Cyrus and I, we can try to find a way to get you into a body permanently. Would that change your mind?"

Robin thought about it, but as he did so, the tremors began. He had resolved that he would not reach for anyone nearby and let it just happen. "Are you okay?" Nura asked. He gestured to her that he ought to not come near him. Robin was having the longest episode he had ever allowed himself to have. Over ten seconds passed and Robin could feel his soul being pushed out of the body. The next thing he

knew, he saw visions of a brown-eyed girl who grew up in Bangalore, going to the local masjid every week, crying as her father beat her mother every day and, ironically, not shedding a single tear during her mother's funeral. She moved to Gurugram where she did odd jobs and completed. She lived with a friend until she was able to earn enough to live in a working women's hostel. When her financial situation improved, she took up a place of her own, where she met a girl named Aditi. Together, they exposed a few scams and stopped a few crimes. They even solved a murder mystery.

When the visions ended, Robin was left watching a dumbfounded football player. He was in Nura's body. *'So, Aditi was right. Even if I don't touch someone my soul will go to the nearest body. Touching someone was just a spontaneous reaction, not a necessity. How do I die then? I guess I have no choice but to join Aditi. And now I know first-hand about this 'Team Transferance'. I thought Aditi was impressive. But this girl Nura has also overcome many hardships. I should feel honoured that they took so many efforts to get me to join them. I only hope that I can be worthy of them.'* Robin stood up, ignoring the Nashik-based football playing teenager. He beckoned for Dante, who joined him immediately, instinctively knowing that it was Robin who was in Nura's body. *'Fortunately, I now know where to go, thanks to this girl's memories. Guess I'm going to Gurugram.'*

23. *Their Training*

King Rajashekhar, who had met me when I was about eight years old, came to know that I had returned to Kaladi for my mother's funeral. He paid me a visit and asked me to prepare a code to bring about social reform in the kingdom. I agreed and drew up a code with sixty-four edicts.

The king was happy with it and even showed it to his ministers for their input. The ministers found that the code was against the Hindu scriptures. I tried to show them how it did not conflict with the scriptures, but it rather supported them. But they were head-strong. They came up with a ploy.

They broke into two groups and each group fixed the same date and time to engage into a debate with me. They informed the King that they would tell him about the result of the debate the next day and that if I defeated them, they would accept my code. The King and I agreed.

The next day both groups informed the King that I had defeated them in the debate. Each group was shocked because despite losing the debate they thought that the other group would have surely won since I could not have shown up to both. When the groups began talking with each other, they realized that I had been at both places at the same time. The code was enacted.

"No! No way!" Nura snapped at Aditi and Robin in the empty banquet hall, as Dante watched from a corner. "I'm tired of being your guinea pigs."

Aditi tried to pacify her, “Come on, Nura. Robin and I need to try and enter a body at the same time to know whether three souls can occupy a single body simultaneously. Both, Robin and I, have already entered your body in the past and seen your memories. What’s the harm if we do it again?”

“That’s true. You have both entered my body and seen my memories, and I’m lucky that those memories are fading. I don’t want to refresh them! You have no idea how violated I feel each time one of you does that.” Nura raised her hands in exasperation “Why don’t you try it on a stranger?”

“We can’t experiment like that on a stranger without his or her consent, we need a volunteer.” Aditi was bluffing. Robin and Aditi both didn’t mind performing the experiment on a stranger. In fact, they had no serious intention of performing the experiment at all. They simply wanted to pull Nura’s leg for a bit. Or rather, Aditi did. Not just because she enjoyed having a laugh at Nura’s expense but because she wanted to make Robin smile. Ever since Robin joined, what came to be referred to internally as, “Team Transferance” seven months ago, Aditi made it her objective to keep his spirits up. When Robin came to her, while in Nura’s body, she and he had a long talk about their way forward. She promised him that she would try and find a way for Robin to remain in a body permanently without having to constantly switch.

Robin grinned quietly as he watched Nura protesting against being used as a vessel for them. At the time he was in the body of a handsome architect who was in his thirties. The last seven months had been good for him. Not only was he able to help out on the team’s mission and bring about a meaningful change in the world, but after

he began training with Aditi, he was able to gain a lot more control over his abilities. The rules that governed his 'possession' power, which he had now become accustomed to referring to as 'transferance' were now as follows:

(i) Once Robin entered a body, like Aditi, he could leave the body without having to wait for an 'escaping episode', through deep meditation and enter the body of anyone else in proximity.

(ii) He could go twenty-four hours without experiencing an 'escaping episode'.

(iii) Just like Aditi, the maximum number of times he could perform the transferance in a 24- hour period was three.

(iv) Once he entered a body and then each subsequent time he entered the same body, the time he could spend in that body decreased, since the vessel built a resistance against his soul.

Aditi's own abilities also improved and she was able to be in another vessel for up to ten hours, and this time would shorten when she moved away from the body. She still aimed at being able to be in another vessel for twenty-four hours like Robin could. Although, she knew that the only reason Robin was able to surpass her in this particular feat was because his own body was destroyed. But that didn't discourage her.

Robin also prepared an anesthetic which he customized himself, back when he was working at NCL. He gave some of it to Aditi whenever she needed it, and also carried around some himself, in a bottle. It basically did what chloroform is represented to do in crime fiction –

acted as an instantaneous incapacitating agent. It proved to be particularly helpful in missions when someone had to be rendered unconscious.

Cyrus, who was an integral member of the Team Transferance, wanted to quit his legal practice completely so that he could work with them full-time, but Aditi requested him not to. The reason she gave him was that she didn't want him to leave a successful legal career for her and let his life revolve around her abilities. The real reason was that she didn't feel that romantic partners would make good work-colleagues. And what they were doing was work. So, Cyrus came over often, but not regularly. It could be argued that Dante was more of a member of Team Transferance than Cyrus since he was there at all the meetings.

The banquet hall that they were standing in, was on the ground floor of the "Sunflower Motel" that Aditi and Nura had acquired. The motel was located at Panvel, which was at the outskirts of Mumbai. It consisted of three floors plus one basement which was actually purchased in the name of Aditi and Nura from the money that they, for a lack of a better word, *stole* from their targets.

But Aditi and Nura still chose to live in their Gupta Bhavan apartment, while Robin stayed in his Sakina Manzil apartment, apartment C-201, which Aditi purchased from Celine, once again from their classified funds. They replaced the normal lock with a passcode lock so that Robin didn't need to bother losing his key while switching from one body to another. The primary reason they kept their respective apartments was because of sentimental value, but there were other reasons as well. Aditi would mostly take care of missions which were closer to the national capital and the entire North of India,

while Robin was deputed with the task of taking care of Mumbai and everything south of it. But they often met up to work jointly and train. Half the time Robin and Cyrus were in Gurugram and Aditi and Nura were in Mumbai. Whenever they were in Mumbai, the girls chose to stay at the Sakina Manzil apartment instead of Sunflower Motel. They decided that the motel would be the base for their work and they wanted to keep their place of work separate from where they lived.

Since Cyrus was still working full-time with Kishu Khatri and Robin kept switching bodies and the girls still lived at the Gupta Bhavan apartment at Gurugram – there was no one to look after the motel apart from the staff. The staff that the girls hired consisted of only nine people – two receptionists, three cooks, two room-service staff, one housekeeping lady and one bell-boy. The rent they got from letting-out the banquet hall made a meagre profit. The motel itself was breaking even every month. Not that they cared. The less crowd it attracted, the better it was for them. In the books, of course, the place was making a profit since they were using it to launder money.

Sunflower Motel was meant to serve three purposes. The first was to be a front for Team Transferance's own operations, which were more active than ever. Second was being able to launder the funds they got from targets and use them for their missions, after paying themselves reasonable amounts. Cyrus took care of laundering the funds as well as opening and maintaining the offshore accounts in which they would park the stolen money. Third was so that the guests in the hotels could be used as vessels for Robin. Instead of entering a body and leaving it off at some place which could be kilometers away, they devised a system for Robin. He would enter the bodies of one of the motel's guests, who was living alone, and was sleeping, and a few

hours later he would drop them off back in their beds. At any given point of time, there was usually at least one lonely guest who was sleeping. This is the reason the motel got bad reviews. The guests Robin possessed felt tired even after they woke up after a long nap. Since they couldn't pinpoint the reason, they blamed it on the ambience and quality of the beds.

The tricky part for Robin was to make sure he kept his mobile phone in a common area before he switched bodies so he could pick it up later. He hated carrying around a mobile phone, but because of the nature of the missions he was doing with the rest of the team, carrying a mobile phone around for coordination was a necessity.

Right below the banquet hall was a small room in the basement. The door of the room read 'Surveillance Room' and true to its name, there were two computers in the room from which one could access all the CCTVs in the motel. However, the room was also used for Team Transferance to conduct research, hold private discussions, formulate plans for their missions and also for Aditi and Robin to train.

On that particular day, the three of them decided to hold the training session in the banquet hall for a change of pace.

"There is one experiment which you guys haven't tried yet." Nura pointed out in the midst of her protesting. "Robin hasn't entered your body yet, Aditi. Don't you think you should try that first? After all, you should first see what happens when two of your souls are in one body before trying to involve a third soul belonging to a foreign vessel in the equation."

This idea irked Aditi, and Nura was well-aware of it. It was not that Aditi was afraid of taking the risk, but the idea of someone scanning

her entire memories made her feel uncomfortable. Of course, she couldn't actually say it out loud that that was her reason for not going ahead with the experiment, since Nura had her memories scanned by Aditi as well as Robin in the past.

"I'm up for it!" Robin exclaimed with his shoulders shrugged.

In Aditi's head she thought *'Of course you are ready. You're not the one whose memories are getting scanned.'*

As if reading Aditi's mind Robin responded, "You know because of our abilities there is a good chance we both will end up scanning each other's memories if our souls possess the same body."

"Fine. What the hell, let's do it." Aditi raised both her hands in submission. "The guy whose body you are possessing might wonder where he is and what he's doing. Nura, you'll handle him right, or do you think we need to tie him up and blindfold him till we are done?"

"No, that's okay, I'll take care of him." Nura responded.

Aditi lied on the floor while Robin sat in *padmasana*. Nura watched. A few seconds later she saw the architect, whose body was possessed by Robin, opening his eyes. She was unsure whether the architect's body was still possessed by Robin or whether Aditi's body was possessed by Robin.

"Where am I?" asked the architect. Nura suspected the experiment was a success. She looked at Aditi's body waiting for some kind of confirmation.

"I feel different." Aditi said.

"Robin, is that you?" Nura inquired.

"No, it's me - Aditi."

They both stared at the architect who was watching the confusing conversation between the two women.

"Robin?" Aditi asked him softly.

"Robin?" the architect replied, "No. My name is Jignesh. I'm sorry, who are you both? And how did I get here?"

Aditi looked around the room although she didn't know what she was looking for. Nura panicked. "Is he… Don't tell me he…." She was unable to complete her sentences.

"I don't know. He shouldn't have. That makes no sense… Nura! Go out, check if he is in any of the staff or the patrons."

Nura left the banquet hall in lightning speed. Jignesh, the architect, grew frustrated and confused. He wasn't getting answers to any of his questions. He proceeded to stand up. As he was half way up, he paused. A grim expression came over his face as he said, "It's me…. Robin."

Aditi gaped at him. "What the hell?!" she yelled uncharacteristically, "Were you trying to pull some kind of prank by pretending not to be Robin"

Robin remained calm. "I was successful in entering your body. I even saw and heard what Jignesh said."

"But I was still in control of my body."

"Yes. I could scan your entire memories, but I couldn't move your body at all. I was just a spectator. Then I tried to re-enter this body and I was successful."

"Thank god, Nura and I were simply…." It was at this moment that it dawned on Aditi. She understood the reason for his sobre

countenance. Robin had scanned her memories. A long pause followed wshich was broken by Aditi "Robin, I can explain…"

"There is no need. I know the reason why you killed those thugs. I know that you did it at a time when you lost control of your true self. I even know that you have no intention of doing it again. So, we don't have to talk about it. "

Aditi bent her head in shame. She knew Robin would never look at her the same way again.

Nura came back in the hall frantically, "Couldn't find him., anywhere!"

"It's okay, Nura. I'm right here."

"What the hell! Robin, don't scare me like that! What happened? Where were you?"

"I was inside Aditi's body was unable to control it. I could only scan her memories and I could just see and hear everything she saw and heard."

"That's strange." Nura said pensively, "Probably because Aditi herself is a soul-transferor, she can't be controlled. That's also why you ended up being a spectator sitting on the back seat instead of the driver seat for the change." She immediately froze, regretting the fact that she used the car analogy on Robin. But Robin seemed unaffected by it. His mind appeared to be elsewhere.

"I presume you couldn't scan my memories?" Robin asked Aditi, to which Aditi shook her head quietly. "So, you want to try entering my body?"

"No!" Aditi and Nura said in unison.

"You gave us enough of a fright for today." Nura continued. "By the way, since you scanned Aditi's memories, you must have seen intimate moments between her and Cyrus… Including the night they started "dating"." Robin nodded with a weak smile. "…You have to give me some juicy details… Besides its only fair… Aditi scanned my mind and has seen my private and personal escapades…." Neither Aditi nor Robin respondend to Nura's jesting, much to her dismay. "…But enough horseplay. You should try entering the same body Aditi is possessing some time. It will be interesting to know if you are able to scan her memories or the memories of the person whose body she is possessing or both."

"A mystery we will solve some other day." Aditi replied as she walked out swiftly.

24. *Their Proposed Date*

When King Rajashekhar had come to visit me in my childhood he had also read out three plays to me which he had written. One day I asked the King whether he was still writing. He sighed, "No. It is very unfortunate, but the three plays that I had written and read to you were all destroyed in a fire. Since then, I have never found the spirit to write anything new."

I consoled him and said, "That is truly unfortunate. The plays were very good and I was very much looking forward to watching them being performed someday. In fact, I liked them so much that they have been etched in my memory. I shall dictate them and your men may take them down."

The King quickly deputed a man to take down my dictation. When the King read the dictated plays, he found that they were word-to-word reproductions of the works he had read to me over fifteen years ago.

"Adi, you need to see this." Nura beckoned. She had seen something of interest on her laptop. The two girls and Robin were in the Gupta Bhavan apartment, going through the details of the mission they named "Project Parliament", when Nura proposed they take a fifteen-minute break, so that she could check her social media handles.

Aditi walked over to her screen. And saw an article titled *'Who is Kalki and why is she trending on Twitter?'*

"What is this about?" Aditi asked since she had no interest in reading the body of the article. "Is it about the actress?"

Nura rolled her eyes. “No, it’s not about the actress. It’s the name the internet gave you and Robin.”

This statement caught Robin’s attention, “What do you mean the name the internet gave us?” Robin was possessing the body of a middle-aged Sardar.

“People have noticed the number of positive changes that have been happening. Not only that, the fact that so many people confessed to crimes and later on claimed that they had no recollection of it, hasn’t gone unnoticed either. Initially people attributed it to God’s work. But the public, at least a lot of them who use the internet, have come up with this figure who they named ‘Kalki’, who they believe is responsible for all these positive changes. Of course, nobody has a fool-proof idea as to how Kalki functions, but some people have theorized that Kalki has the ability to possess other people’s bodies. There are hundreds of theories and tens of thousands of tweets with the hashtag #*IndiaWithKalki*. There’s a ton of support for this figure. Some amateur artists, graphic designers and students have put up artwork of what they imagine Kalki would look like. Look, the art includes God-like figures as well as shadow-like ones. Congrats, both of you have a fan-base now, and that too, very huge.”

“Interesting.” Robin commented as he checked out a photo of the art-work Nura had put up on the screen. “I think Patil will soon agree with that theory. The only reason he hasn’t mentioned anything about the existence of someone who can possess bodies is probably because his lawyer Kishu Khatri advised him against it.”

“Okay, guys. Can we focus on the mission in hand?” Aditi interjected. “Or do you guys want to skip it? Because I’m all for that as well.”

Nura frowned, “We’ve been through this. We need to make sure the amendment to the Information Technology Act doesn’t get passed in Parliament. The provisions are so wide that the government could use them to restrict free speech and put innocent people critiquing the ruling government behind bars.”

“Still messing with legislation… Anyways, like you said, we have been through this. Since Robin and you are both for it, you have my blessing. I wish I could have helped you guys more.”

“No. It’s important that our names stay away from this. Robin is the only one who can enter covertly, attend the session from the balcony and then use transferance to possess the body of the Member of Parliament Girish Shah, the most vocal proponent of the Amendment Bill. If Girish Shah speaks against it, then at least a dozen others will withdraw their support as well. Of course, the ideal scenario would be if Robin could enter Girish Shah’s body prior to him entering Parliament House, but that just wasn’t logistically possible. So instead we had him possess this current body which belonged to one of the guys who had a pass to attend today.” Nura explained to Aditi, “The only way you and I could enter is with a pass, which we would have to get in our actual names since there is no way you could enter Parliament House in someone else’s body while carrying your own body in a bag. Especially after this concept of Kalki has arisen, it's best that you and I don’t create any record of being anywhere near a place where the transferance is being performed. What about when Girish Shah claims he didn’t have any memory of opposing the bill. What would happen if they checked the names of people who attended the Parliament on that day and began an investigation? No, Robin has to go alone.”

“Well, that was a lot of exposition.” Aditi muttered under her breath.

“So, ready to go, Robin?” Nura asked.

“Yes, I think it should be a piece of cake.” he said coolly as he stood up to leave.

“You won’t be allowed to have a mobile phone inside, so there won’t be any way for us to communicate. You are on your own for this one.”

“Can do.” Robin opened the door.

“I’ll wait for you at the Caprisa Café at Connaught Place in case you get done early.”

Robin didn’t respond. He didn’t even look back. He just nodded and then closed the door behind him.

Aditi turned to Nura, “So, why do you have to wait at Caprisa for him? Why is that important for the plan?”

“Huh…” Nura fumbled as she pretended to go back to reading the article “Oh, it isn’t that important. Just to be nearby in case something goes wrong. Also to catch up after the mission and check if everything went fine…”

Aditi smiled as Nura continued to stare blankly at the monitor “Nura….”

“Yeah?”

“Do you have a thing for Robin?”

“What?!” Nura now turned around, “No, of course not. Why would you even think that?”

“Okay. If you say so.” Aditi sneered.

“Don’t you have to get ready for your date with Cyrus?”

"Yeah. He said he'll text me once he gets done with his matter in the Supreme Court. I'll go check on the reception staff till then." Aditi proceeded towards the door and after opening it continued, "Maybe the four of us could double date some time." And before Nura could respond Aditi quickly closed the door behind her.

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It was one of the coldest days of winter in Delhi. Caprisa was a café that was popular yet affordable. It mostly attracted a young crowd. As she sipped her hot chocolate, Nura observed the patrons around her. She was the only one sitting at a table alone, the rest were either groups or couples. Nura found it amusing and paradoxical how despite the freezing weather, the kids who appeared to come from richer families were actually wearing less clothes than their comrades. She wondered if a person's sensitivity to cold weather was inversely proportional to their prosperity.

There was one couple in particular who were sitting at the opposite corner, who had caught her attention. There was nothing about them that stood out. They were a regular young college couple doing the stupid things young lovers do. The boy was alternating between feeding himself and the girl. The girl was enjoying the special treatment as she didn't have to move her hands at all. She did, however, choose to use her hands to text on her phone. Nura presumed that she was texting another boy simultaneously. But Nura herself was aware that the only reason she wanted her presumption to be true was because she was jealous. She had spent the first-half of her teenage years living her life under her father's thumb. She would go straight home after attending her all-girls school and barely even spoke to any boy to whom she wasn't related. The second-half of her

teenage years were spent struggling to make ends meet. The little money she had stolen from her father's cupboard was barely even enough to cover her college tuition fees. She got part-time jobs at fast-food joints, call-centres and book-stores. At these places she got used to becoming a bit social and opened up as a person. She even found herself attracted to a few people. However, for some reason she always feared getting into any kind of romantic relationship.

Since she had never acted on any attractive impulse in her younger days she had no idea how to act on it as an adult. As she sat there thinking about what the protocol was, she heard a familiar voice "Nura?"

Nura looked up and only to find Dhwani standing in front of her table.

"Oh Dhwani. Hi!"

"Hey, how's it going? Are you alone here?"

"No. Just waiting for a friend. Not sure if he'll show up."

"Ugh. Same here. Got stood up." This statement did not surprise Nura one bit.

The two women just stared at each other involuntarily nodding their heads. Nura waited for Dhwani to say it was nice that they met and bid farewell. But Dhwani just stood there. Nura understood what she wanted, but was very hesitant to offer it.

"Would you like to join until my friend shows up?"

"Sure. I guess I can."

Dhwani began asking about Aditi. Because of Aditi's social media posts she was aware that they had started the motel together, but she

never met Aditi in person after the night at The Crimson Dog. After that, without any provocation from Nura, she began complaining about how she was fired from her job at Datasaurus.

As Nura sat there regretting the fact that she offered Dhwani to join her out of politeness, she heard someone screaming. All the patrons were annoyed by the incomprehensible shouting that was going on outside the restaurant. The source of the sound was a middle-aged man with long hair who barged into the cafe "Oye! There's a bomb in the 2nd floor washroom! Get out."

If the café were filled with a more mature crowd, then the café would have been cleared out in a matter of five seconds. Ironically, the younger generation who were actually capable of running faster, were far slower in reacting to this statement. Perhaps it's because the increasing number of candid cameras shows that they are distrustful and are always on guard against being pranked.

The middle-aged man reiterated the statement and once again demanded that everyone get out of the premises, before exiting himself. Nura stood at her spot, while Dhwani shouted "Come on. Let's go!" The last time Nura ever ran away from a problem was when she was sixteen. After that she always faced every problem head on. She wasn't going to stop now. She accompanied Dhwani till the door of the Café. But when they reached the stairwell, instead of following Dhwani downstairs, she ran upstairs. She passed by another couple who were running down the stairs. The man yelled to her that there was a bomb upstairs thinking that she didn't know about it. She ignored him and kept climbing up.

When she reached the second floor, there was another restaurant on her left and on her right was the common washroom and the elevator.

She rushed inside and right there in front of her was an open duffle bag containing a cylindrical metallic object with several different coloured wires.

She paused for a second. Then, she went on her knees and slowly opened the bag further in order to get a better look at the bomb. It was very different from what she had seen in the movies. She was unable to see a timer anywhere on it. There was only one single tiny red LED bulb that kept blinking. Nura had to think fast. Strategizing plans for Aditi had given her the confidence that she was able to solve any problem. *'There is a solution. There is always one.'* she thought to herself as she cupped her hands over her mouth and nose. *'Taking the bomb out of here and on the terrace might minimize the damage but it also carries the risk that I might actually be the one who triggers the bomb by mishandling it. Also, the neighbouring buildings are taller than this one, so there is a greater risk to those if the bomb explodes in the open terrace. I don't even know what trigger-condition is for this bomb. Is it time-based, sensor-based or something else altogether? I don't have enough data to make an informed decision here. There isn't anything strong enough that I can cover it in that would even slightly minimize the impact. Is the best alternative to do nothing and wait for the bomb squad?'*

In times of great despair, even an atheist looks to a higher power, if not consciously, then at least subconsciously. Nura was unaware that as her palms were joined before her, she was asking for help in her mind, from nobody in particular. And just like how a drowning man sees hope in a single blade of grass floating in the water, so did Nura get a small glimmer of hope when her mobile phone began buzzing. She pulled it out of her pocket thinking it could have been Aditi, who could perhaps guide her on what to do. But she was disappointed when it turned out to be a call from an unknown landline number.

Believing the call to be a sales call she threw her phone on the ground, and went back to thinking about how to solve the problem at hand. The phone stopped buzzing. Two seconds later again there was a call from the same number. Nura glanced at the number and chose to ignore it again. However, on the sixth ring, it struck Nura that the call from the random mobile number may not be a sales call, but from the only person who could actually get her out of that jam. She grabbed the phone in a rush.

"Hello?!" she answered frantically.

"Hello Nura? Everything okay?" came the unfamiliar voice. Nura was ecstatic. She was hoping to hear an unknown voice speaking in a familiar tone.

"Robin? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Calling from outside the Parliament House. I wasn't able to -"

"Robin, listen carefully. There is a bomb in the Caprisa Café building."

"A bomb?!"

"I'm sitting in front of it right now. I need to know how to defuse it. Have you used the transferance three times in the last 24 hours or not?"

"I haven't. I can use it one more time."

"Okay. Outside Parliament House there has to be some members of the bomb squad. They are always there when Parliament is in session."

"Yeah, I think I saw one police van outside the entry gate with officers who had bomb-defusal suits handy."

"Make sure you enter the most senior and well-experienced officer in the squad. Once you enter his body, video-call me from his mobile-phone so that I can show you the bomb."

"I'm on it!"

Robin hung up. Nura felt a little better, not because she thought that her plan was going to be a success, but just because she got a chance to speak to Robin. As she waited, she thought about calling Aditi to see if it was possible for her to help in a similar manner, but decided against it. What were the chances of Aditi being near someone from a bomb squad? Plus, it was important to keep her phone available for when Robin video called her.

In front of the gate of the Parliament House, a man was running towards a police van. One of the officers found this behaviour suspicious and commanded that the man halt. But Robin was too motivated. He pushed the officer aside and tried to enter the van. There were two officers inside, one in his 40s and the other in his 50s. The officer Robin pushed aside pulled him back outside the van. At this point, Robin closed his eyes and began to focus. Next thing he knew he was seeing the memories of the officer who was in his 50s. As soon as the memories went from the foreground to the background, he pulled out the phone of the officer and proceeded to video-call Nura. He stepped out to get a better connection as two or three police officers were now man-handling the man who tried to force his way into the police van.

Nura was thrilled to get the video call from some unknown number, that too less than half-a-minute after she cut Robin's call. If she wasn't in such a pressing position, she would have taken some time to appreciate the speed in which Robin achieved the task. She answered

the call and saw the face of a dark-skinned man with a moustache. "Show it to me." the man said.

Nura faced her front-camera towards the open bag and moved it around so that he could see it from all angles.

"Okay. This bomb is triggered by a remote control. You need to disconnect the bomb from the receiver, so that it doesn't receive the detonation signal. Nura, lift the bomb slightly and show me where the blue and yellow wires end."

She duly complied with his directions. There was a tiny black box at the bottom of the bomb, to which the yellow wire connected. The blue wire was just connected to the red wire. After observing the wires, Robin instructed, "Listen. Do you have some kind of blade or scissors on you?"

"Yes!" she pulled out her pair of pointed tip scissors from her clutch.

"Okay. Now, very carefully cut the yellow wire which is at the bottom of the bomb."

Nura wondered how 'cutting' could be done 'carefully', but this was not the time for questions. This was the time for action. She kept the phone on the ground and held the bomb in place with her right hand, while her left hand held the scissors over the yellow wire. She cut it swiftly. The red LED light stopped blinking.

"Robin, it's done!"

Robin let out a moan of relief, "Oh God." He panted heavily as his heart was running a mile-a-minute. "Good. Now get out of there, I'll despatch a bomb disposal unit to-"

As Robin spoke there was a huge sound and the video call blacked out. “Hello? Hello? Nura?” There was no response. Robin cut the video call and called her again. This time too there was no answer. Without thinking Robin began running towards Caprisa Café.

25. *Their Visit to the Hospital*

I left Kaladi and once again travelled extensively with my disciples. My travels brought me to the holy city of Puri. I visited the famous Jagannath temple there, only to find the altar empty. I was informed by the people that due to Buddhists attacks some of the priests had put the wooden image of Lord Jagannath in a box which they buried at the banks of Chilka lake.

I did not like seeing the empty altar. So I engaged in deep meditation on the banks of Chilka. Using the heightened sensory abilities, I was able to find the exact location of the box. I told the locals where to dig, and once they found the box there was a huge celebration. At an auspicious time, the image was re-installed in the altar.

I set up a monastery in Puri and put Padmapāda in charge of it.

It was pitch black, and the only sound Nura heard was some faint beeping. The beeping got louder and louder. Nura finally opened her eyes to see a white ceiling. She turned her head towards the right to search for the source of the sound. It was a heart monitor. Above the heart monitor hanging from a metal stand was the I.V. bag which was connected to her body by a tube.

While still only half-conscious, Nura tried to get up with her eyes closed. “Nura, don’t.” came a familiar voice. Nura opened her eyes to find Aditi’s face in front of her own. She was gently pushing her torso back to the bed. Nura didn’t resist. Cyrus was standing with the doctor who had salt and pepper hair. They are standing behind Aditi.

"What happened?" Nura mumbled.

The three of them waited for each other to answer the question. Finally, the doctor responded hesitantly, "There was a second bomb."

Nura grew confused as to why the doctor was being more responsive than her own friends.

"The doctor is Robin." Aditi clarified, "That's how we got permission to be here right now."

"Tell me, what *exactly* happened?"

Robin took over, "You successfully defused one bomb, but there was a second one on the terrace, which caused half of the ceiling of the second and third floor to fall. The ceiling fell on you and they found your body in the debris."

Nura waited for Robin to continue. She felt that there was something the three of them were hiding from her.

"Casualties?"

Robin hesitated to answer, so Aditi answered "One death. A police officer on duty who was answering the emergency call made for the bomb. He was right outside the second-floor washroom."

Nura closed her eyes in disappointment.

"You saved several lives." Robin added immediately, "If both the bombs exploded then the damage and loss of life would have been worse. The entire building would have caved in and fallen on the street on the bystanders and it would also -"

"Enough!" Nura screamed with her eyes closed. A single tear rolled out from the corner of her right eye. She tried to remove her hands

from under the sheets in order to wipe her face, when something stopped them. She opened her eyes to find Aditi pressing down on her arms from above the sheets.

"What? What is it?"

Aditi's eyes watered as she slowly shook her head and loosened her grip. Nura noticed that Cyrus and Robin's heads were bent down. She slowly lifted her hands towards her face. That's when she noticed the bandages on her left hand. The bandages were just a little below where her wrists were supposed to be. But there was no wrist. No palm. No fingers. Nothing. She placed her left arm in front of her face and turned it around as if trying to look for the rest of it. She let out a few gasps in horror.

In a soft tone, with tears in her eyes Aditi explained, "When the debris fell on you, your hand was severed."

At this point everyone in the room expected Nura to scream or wail, including Nura herself. To everyone's surprise, including her own, Nura calmly said "I'd like to take some rest, please leave me alone."

This unnatural nature was incomprehensible to Aditi, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Came the reply simply. Nura did not make eye contact with any of them and she turned her head aside.

Aditi nodded, "We'll be right outside in case you need -"

"No. That won't be necessary. Go home. We'll meet again tomorrow." There was absolutely no frustration or grief in the tenor of her voice. She still continued to avoid eye-contact.

The three of them slowly made their way out of the room without saying another word. Nura lay there motionless, continuing to stare at the wall.

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There was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" Nura shouted. She checked the clock on the wall opposite her bed. It was 8.15 p.m. She didn't know where the time went. Since the time others left her, she didn't sleep or get out of the bed. She just stared at the wall and let her mind wander. The only time she was compelled to look away from the wall, which she came to befriend, was when the nurses would come in to take her temperature and generally check on how she was doing.

A female orderly came in with a tray.

"How are you feeling?" From her voice and face Nura presumed that she was hailing from the north-eastern part of India.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

"If there is anything else you need then please do not hesitate to ask." she said as she folded out the tray-table from the side of the bed and placed the tray in her hands on top of it. Nura thanked the orderly as she removed the aluminum foil covering the food.

"If you need anyone to talk to, I'm right here." offered the orderly with a smile as she opened the plastic cups containing the various food items.

"Now you are pushing it."

The orderly partially frowned in confusion, "I'm sorry?"

"I know it's you, Robin."

There was a long pause as Nura picked up her spoon. "How did you know?" came the reply finally.

"Firstly, no orderly is that friendly when serving food. They have to serve food to multiple patients and are usually in a hurry. They don't have time for chit-chat. Secondly, I didn't see the large trolley outside when you opened the door. They don't bring the food-trays from the pantry one-by-one. They bring them all in a large trolley which they leave outside the door as they bring each tray. Thirdly, they have a list in their hand with the name of all the patients on it and with the details of their dietary restrictions and meal preferences."

Robin sighed with a smile on his face.

"Oh and that isn't all." Nura continued, "No hospital in the world gives fried rice and chicken Manchurian gravy to its patients." Saying this she lifted the plastic cups containing the food items that were clearly from some restaurant.

Robin scratched his head in shame. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." she replied as she swallowed a spoon full of the fried rice dipped in Manchurian gravy. "Mm… Indian version of Chinese food is the best!"

"By the way, how did you know it was me and not Aditi?"

"Well, for starters Aditi is a little scared of me, so she wouldn't dare go against my express request for being alone. Also, she would insist that I eat healthy hospital food and she wouldn't bring Chinese for me. Come, sit." Nura patted the right-side of her bed inviting Robin. He sat facing her.

"But genuinely. How are you feeling?"

"I don't know." she replied as she let out an almost orgasmic sigh after taking another bite of food. "I guess it just hasn't sunk-in fully yet."

There was a prolonged silence as Robin watched Nura relish her meal.

"What you did took a lot of courage. I'm extremely proud of you."

"Courage? Please you and Aditi risk your lives on the field during every one of our missions, while I just sit at home waiting for your calls. I did nothing that you wouldn't do yourself."

"There's a difference… Say a man wants to commit suicide, so he walks to a nearby bridge. On the way, he comes across a building which is on fire. He barges in and saves some of the occupants who were trapped inside. Was him sacrificing his life "courageous" or "heroic"? Obviously not! He was going to kill himself anyway, so he didn't really sacrifice anything. Similarly, I consider my life to have ended on the day of the accident. Whenever, I risking my life, I'm not risking anything of value. Even if I devote how many ever days to our missions, its not a sacrifice because I don't consider my time to be mine anymore. You have devoted your entire life to the causes that you believe in, and today you were ready to sacrifice your life which I know you value. That's admirable."

Again, there was long pause during which Nura's cheeks flushed with embarrasment.

"I'm really sorry, Nura"

"Sorry? Why are *you* sorry?"

"You were waiting at the café for me. If you hadn't-"

"Listen to me." She placed her hand on his shoulder, "You didn't put bombs in that building. You didn't even call me to the café. I did it on my own volition. You had nothing to do with it."

Robin did not protest. He just looked down helplessly.

"And promise me one thing." she continued.

"What's that?"

"That you won't go on a revenge spree... I can tell by that look in your eyes that you are going to take all of this personally and you are going to go above and beyond to find out who planted those bombs. And we will find that out. You and I, together. But don't let your emotions guide you. We have to treat this as any of our other missions. I don't want you to do anything about it on your own without telling me, understand?" saying this Nura gave him a stern stare. It was only after Robin nodded in agreement that she continued eating.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to offer you any. Here." She placed a spoon of rice forward.

"No. I'm good."

"Come on… have a bite. Just taste it." She insisted while still holding up her spoon.

He leaned forward to take a bite and then leaned back to chew.

"How is it?"

"Good!" He exclaimed as he swallowed the morsel. Again, there was a long pause as the two just looked at each other's eyes. Then Robin leaned forward steadily and placed his lips on Nura's. When Nura lifted her right hand he imagined it was to push him away, but instead she placed it on his back and pushed him towards her.

Unbeknownst to both of them, Roopesh Gala, a male orderly, had opened the door and peeked inside. Roopesh had a huge crush on the orderly whose body Robin was possessing. He had seen her entering the room a while earlier but she didn't come out for a long time, so he had decided to check on her. In haste, he forgot to knock. He was absolutely shocked and surprised to find the girl he liked kissing a female patient. He closed the door, as hastily as he had opened it, while trying to make minimal sound. Heartbroken to learn that his crush was a lesbian, he decided to take a break and go out for a walk. He took solace in the fact that he now had an explanation as to why she never reciprocated his flirtatious comments.

Inside the room Nura finally decided to push Robin away.

"What happened? Did you hear that too?" Robin looked behind to make sure the door was still closed.

"No. It's not that. It's just…" she paused.

"What is it?"

She sighed, "I think I like you, Robin. I think I have liked you ever since the first moment you and I met at that park at Juhu. You are sensitive and caring and smart and basically everything that I always wanted. But I don't know how this is going to work…"

"Is it because I'm in a woman's body right now? Because I can change th-"

"No. It's not that. It's that you will always be in a different body every day. And I know you can't control it and I know that I always knew about your predicament. It never stopped me from liking you before, but it's only dawned on me how it would feel to be physical with a different person every day…"

At this point Nura lifted her hands to cover her face and for a second, she forgot that she had lost her left hand. Realizing that only half her face was covered she used her right hand to try and cover her entire face and continued, "And I know it's very stupid of me because this is exactly what I wanted and now while that it's happening, I'm pushing you away… But I don't know if I'll ever be able to overcome this. I thought I could, I really did. And maybe someday I will. Right now, I just can't. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Robin was sitting quietly this entire time. Without any change in his expression, he patiently waited for Nura to be done, "It's okay. I understand. You know after Pramila… I didn't think that I would have these kinds of feelings for anybody else. When Aditi met me at Patil's villa, I didn't take her offer to join her too seriously. At the time I was under the mistaken belief that I was left in this realm after my death only for the purpose of taking my revenge. How self-centered I was to think that the universe would break its own rules only for me and that too only for something as petty as revenge? When I met you, I was actually ready for death. But what you said to me, or maybe it was how you said it… I don't know. But it gave me something I had completely lost... Hope. My second life was given a new purpose. Possibly, its true purpose. I also think a large part I owe to the fact that I possessed your body that night at Jogger's Park. I felt your pain. I felt your strength. I don't think there was a single person whose body I have entered who has inspired me more than you did. When we started working together, my feelings for you grew stronger. However, I had to restrain myself from acting on those feelings. I even tried to tell myself that those feelings weren't real. I thought that if I acknowledged them then it would cheapen the purpose of my

existence and that if I acted on them then I would once again be guilty of being selfish…"

Nura wanted to interject here, but restrained herself and allowed him to continue.

"But you are right. I know where you are coming from. If I were in your place, I don't think I could love someone with my affliction. In any case the entire idea of you and me was just me being narcissistic. I'm glad you stopped it before we took it any further."

At this point Nura held his hand. "Robin, there is nothing wrong for you to want a normal life. I don't think that the universe conspired to leave you here. I still maintain that it's a fluke. But you believe otherwise and I respect that. But I don't think it's fair for this burden to be put on your head and you spending the rest of your days in pure service without thinking about your own happiness. We don't even know whether you can die. How long do you plan on doing this? A hundred years? A thousand? If you are planning to be in this realm for long then remember that you are running a marathon, not a sprint. You need to think about your own mental well-being and live a balanced life. Otherwise, you will burn-out. Fall in love, share a laugh with friends, smell the mud after the first rain, admire the sunset… Enjoy your life."

"Fall in love? With my current condition, who do you think would?"

Nura thought about it. She thought of telling him that he would meet a woman one day who did not mind his condition. But that statement would be insincere. Instead, she reassured him, "Aditi will find a way to get you in a body permanently. I know she will. In fact - *we* will, as Team Transferance."

"Yeah. You are right." Nura's hand was still on Robin's. Robin turned his hand upward in order to lightly squeeze her hand. "Thank you." He said simply. Nura squeezed her eyes shut for a fraction of a second, as if to say, 'Anytime'. Robin stood up to leave.

"Oh, and Robin"

"Yeah?"

"Please don't try to come as a nurse tomorrow to give me a sponge bath."

Robin and Nura both chuckled. Robin nodded and left with a sorrowful smile on his face.

26. *Their Encounter with a Terrorist*

Inside a Saraswati temple in the north, there was a throne known as the 'Sarvajna Peetham', the seat of omniscience. The throne was guarded by famous scholars from all over India. Any scholar who proved that he knew everything, would be allowed to ascend the pedestal. He would have to defeat scholars belonging to the different sects and faiths. The right to ascend the pedestal would be based on a unanimous decision of all the scholars. Till I arrived, no one was ever deemed worthy to occupy it.

I went to the temple and expressed my desire to debate with the scholars there. The scholars engaged in debates with me on various subjects.

At the end of the debate, all the scholars unanimously conceded: "You are a limitless ocean of knowledge and learning. You know all the scriptures and all the branches of learning. We consider ourselves greatly honoured, even to be defeated by you. Please ascend the throne".

I worshipped the Goddess Saraswati with a rhythmic hymn. I was about to ascend the throne. At this moment, a voice from heaven was heard: "Stop there, my child." It was the divine voice of Sarada, the mother of the universe, reverberating through the temple. "You may have convinced these scholars that you are worthy to sit on the throne. But you must convince me as well."

"What time is the flight again?" Cyrus shouted from inside the bathroom as he brushed his teeth.

"For the nth time, it's at 10 a.m." Aditi shouted back as she went through her checklist of items to pack. Cyrus spat his paste and came out to check on Aditi.

"Calm down. It's only 7.15, we have plenty of time."

She continued to keep her head down and re-check "Will you please stop wasting time. I don't want to be late."

Cyrus walked up to her and stopped her as she was applying her eye-liner. He held her by her shoulders and gave her reassurance, "Don't be nervous, I'm sure they will love you."

"Yeah. I'm not nervous at all." Aditi lied.

Two weeks ago Cyrus' mother, Yasmin Bookwalla had pinged Aditi on Facebook Messenger. They exchanged pleasantries and started chatting. Mrs. Bookwalla told Aditi how happy she was that Cyrus was dating her. She even asked a lot of questions about Cyrus for some reason. After a long chat, she finally insisted that Aditi should stay at their house in Mumbai for a few days. When she read the message her heart sank. Obviously, Aditi didn't tell her that she was staying close to Mumbai for a few days every month because she owned the Sunflower Motel. Cyrus' parents were still her parents' neighbours and her parents knew nothing of her owning a motel.

A mutually agreeable weekend was fixed and the two ladies exchanged phone numbers so that they could continue to stay in touch. It was also decided that Aditi would stay with her parents' house and would visit the Bookwallas' house for meals.

When Aditi informed Cyrus of the development, he initially tried to put it off and told her he had multiple appointments on that day.

However, Aditi didn't want to disappoint his mother, and insisted him to make time for it. He reluctantly cleared his schedule.

The flights were booked and the itinerary was finalized. Mrs. Bookwalla, knowing that Aditi was a vegetarian, had even taken from her a list of her favourite dishes so that she could ask the cook to prepare meals according to her liking.

In normal circumstances, Aditi wouldn't have been too disturbed by the trip. But for some reason like taking down serial killers, thieves and terrorists, it no longer made her feel nervous. Meeting her potential in-laws on the other hand instilled trepidation in her. She was also certain that the Bookwallas had told her parents about her and Cyrus, something which she had never discussed with her parents. So, there were two sets of parents whom she could potentially disappoint.

Aditi wanted to purchase a decent gift for Cyrus' parents, but because of the constant missions, she was unable to even get time to pack her bags. So, she just decided to get them two bottles of scotch from the airport.

Parsis were very conservative about marrying outside their community. Aditi was sure that Cyrus' parents weren't happy about their relationship but made an exception for Aditi and extended her an olive branch only because they were her neighbours and knew her since her school days.

The fact that she was nervous also made her happy, for it meant that she was no longer the emotionless drone she had turned into.

Once the bags were packed and they both were dressed they opened their bedroom door, only to find Nura watching TV.

"Bye, Nura." Aditi shouted as she dragged her bag out of her room.

Nura glared at her, "I don't think you'll want to leave just yet."

Aditi and Cyrus looked at her and then at the TV. A news anchor was talking and there was a video was playing which showed police officers standing outside the St. Augustus High School, which was only a few kilometers away from them.

"As you can see the police have set up a perimeter outside the gate of the school and are trying to make contact with the terrorists." reported the news anchor. "For those of you who have just joined us, earlier this morning a group of at least four men with rifle guns entered St. Augustus School at Gurugram during the morning assembly and have now taken the students and the school staff hostage. Three members of the staff managed to flee from inside the school and are currently being debriefed by the police officials. Till now, we have not received any information about the total number of terrorists, which organization they belong to and what are their demands. Our correspondent is at the scene…"

"Oh… my… god..." Aditi involuntarily blurted out in a hushed tone. She turned to Nura who was still glaring at her, as if trying to non-verbally communicate to her *'You know what you have to do.'* Aditi nodded at her.

"I have to take care of this. You go ahead." she told Cyrus.

"What?! I'm not leaving you to handle this on your own."

She cupped her hands in his "Cyrus, I cannot afford to watch the people I love getting hurt anymore. I *need* you to stay away from this."

"It's too dangerous."

"For Nura and you it is. But with my abilities, I'll be fine, trust me."

"I'm not saying I'll go on the field with you, but I can help with the back-end."

"As long as you are nearby you will be tempted to help me if you think I'm even in the slightest bit of danger. Even if you don't, I will worry that you will, and that's going to distract me. I need you to leave. I'll take another flight as soon as I take care of this."

"But -"

"I'm not in a state of mind to negotiate on this," She told him sternly, "and each minute we waste debating about it, the danger on the lives of children is increasing."

Cyrus paused and sighed. "Okay. If that's what you want, just be careful."

"I will."

Cyrus picked up his hand bag, kissed Aditi and slowly walked out of the house.

Aditi noticed that Nura had a scowl on her face which she recognized as a look of impatience attempted to be concealed. Aditi understood that Nura did not appreciate Aditi wasting any time when the lives of children were at stake. She had a 'no nonsense' policy when it came to cruelty or danger to children. Her rage was further amplified by the loss of her arm, which had turned her a bit bitter.

"What's the plan?" Aditi asked her.

***

Six hours had passed since Aditi left for St. Augustus High School. Nura grew worried. She had formulated the perfect strategy for her to get into the school, take down the terrorists and come back unscathed. However, it wasn't supposed to take so long. She contemplated calling Aditi on her phone but decided against it, since there was a chance that calling Aditi would distract her and put her in danger.

Nura watched the news intently, which was no longer even showing live footage of the school. The police forbade the news channels from taking any videos since they apprehended that the terrorists might be watching the channels and could know what the police were up to. So, she had to watch the same video from the morning in loop and listen to the news anchor say the same thing over and over again.

Suddenly, the news anchor paused mid-sentence to listen to some information being given to her on her ear piece, "I've just been informed that there were indeed faint sounds of gunshots coming from inside the school. It is still unclear whether there are any casualties. However, the seriousness of the situation has certainly escalated and…." She stopped mid-sentence again to listen to some more information, "and I've just been informed that a group of children are now running out of the school towards the gates. It appears that the children have been let to go or managed to escape. It is still uncertain whether all the children are safe, and we will know that only after a headcount is taken by the police. The fate of the terrorists is still unknown. Our correspondent at the scene is trying to get in touch with one of the teachers who has just left the gate along with the children. However, the police have …."

Nura's phone rang at this moment. It was Aditi calling.

"Yeah Aditi, everything okay?"

"Come to our base." came a man's voice. Nura assumed that it was merely Aditi in someone else's body.

"Why? What happened?"

"Just, come now." saying this the man cut the call.

Nura left for the hotel.

***

Nura punched in the numerical code and entered the security room in the basement. She was stunned to see two men with long beards in the room. The one wearing a red shirt with the sleeves rolled up and jeans was standing and turned towards her. While the other man, in a light green sweater and blood-stained cargo pants, was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. Because the room was dark Nura couldn't get a good look of his face, but the way both his hands were behind him, Nura could tell that his hands were tied up.

"It's me." the man in the red shirt said to her, "Pumpernickel." Pumpernickel was a code word, the use of which was devised by Robin. Robin had inferred that the means by which Godbole was able to enter Mahima's apartment was by pretending to be him. Hence, if any member of Team Transferance needed to verify if anyone claiming to be Robin or Aditi was genuine, they ought to ask for the code-word.

"Where's your body?" Nura asked Aditi. Aditi nodded her head towards a brown suitcase on the table next to the entrance. Nura saw it and was satisfied that the man standing before her was Aditi.

"Who is he?" Nura scanned the man sitting on the floor with her eyes.

"Both these guys were part of the group of five terrorists that had taken over the school. The current body I'm in was the third body I entered. I couldn't change back to my original body since I didn't get time to restrain this body first. But the memories of this guy have shocked me. I had to bring these two here after killing the other three men."

"You killed them?" Nura was furious. But then she saw remorse in the eyes of the man Aditi was possessing.

"There was no other way." Aditi replied softly. And she bent to pull up her trousers a bit and revealed a revolver tucked in the sock of her left leg. She placed the gun on the table next to Nura, right next to the brown suitcase. She recouped herself and continued, "But that doesn't matter. This guy on the floor is the leader and he recruited these other guys with an interesting story. I had to keep him alive for questioning. So, I simply shot him on the leg." At this moment Aditi bent down in front of the leader of the terrorist group and lifted his face up by his hair. "He said he was recruited by Allah."

"So? He's deranged. You brought him here for that?"

"No. It's how he recounted his interactions with the so-called 'Allah'. He told these guys that Allah came to visit him taking the form of different people. This man claimed that 'Allah' would come to him time and again and give him small jobs to perform. He was even the one who ordered them to plant the bomb at Caprisa café last month." At this moment Aditi turned to Nura, "Do you know what this means?"

"No. You don't mean it!" Nura's eyebrows pressed together in worry. "There is another person out there with powers like yours and Robin's?"

"Exactly. Not just that. It seems that this third soul-transferor is after me. All his plans involve me. Think about it, the bombing and now this incident which happened a few blocks away from us." Aditi paused, "I just don't understand what his goal is. Does he want to kill us? Is he trying to distract us? I have no idea…. That's why I brought this guy here. We either have to wait for a day so that I can enter his body and scan his memories, or we can ask Robin to fly back immediately so that he can do it. Maybe if we observe some conversations between him and the third soul-transferor, we'll be able to get some clues as to who he is. Nura, I need you too…"

At this moment the man sitting on the floor moaned. He sat up-right but still kept his head bent down. He attempted to make a sound. It was barely audible but to both the girls it sounded as if he moaned "Nura…."

Nura bent a bit in order to get a better view of his face. The man spoke again, this time in a louder, yet feeble, tone. "Nura, didn't you recognize me, my child?"

There was a silence in the room as the two girls stared at the man with an expression of confusion and surprise. Finally, the silence was broken by Nura, "Father?"

Aditi looked at Nura in shock and then turned to look at the old man sitting on the floor. She knew that Nura's father abused her in childhood and that he even killed her mother. She could not believe

that the man sitting before them was the one person who Nura loathed most.

As she stared at the man, all of a sudden, there was a burst of blood from the man's chest. Aditi turned behind and saw Nura holding the gun that she had placed on the table, which was pointed towards the old man. There was still rage in her eyes. She placed the gun back on the table and ran out of the room.

"Nura!" Aditi shouted. Instead of following Nura she first went to check on the shot-wound of the man. But there was no point, the breathing had stopped completely. When she came to the conclusion that it was pointless tending to the man's wounds, she ran out to chase Nura. She climbed up the stairs and saw Nura leaving the banquet hall and walking towards the road.

When Aditi finally caught up to Nura she was standing on the side-walk. Aditi caught her by the shoulder and turned her around. Nura wore an expression of utter confusion on her face.

"Nura, I know what you must be going through, but you just cost us good lead – "

"Aditi, how did we get here?"

"What do you mean? You just ran here. After you…" Aditi's eyes darted around. There were a few pedestrians on the sidewalk. Aditi was still in the terrorist's body. To them it seemed like a rugged middle-aged man was arguing with his one-handed spouse. She continued in a hushed tone, "After you killed your father."

"My father?"

"Yes, the leader of the four-man terrorist squad…"

Nura looked at Aditi with shock, "Aditi, I don't know what... I don't remember doing that."

Aditi sighed. "You must have blacked out. It happens when we feel a strong –"

"Aditi, you don't understand… I have no memory of doing that at all!"

It was at this moment that Aditi understood what may have just happened. She once again looked around at the people on the street, but this time with utmost fear. Nura ran back inside. Aditi continued to stand there examining the faces of the people on the street for a moment before following her.

Back in the basement Nura put her face one foot away from the man's. After observing him for a few seconds she confidently proclaimed, "This man is not my father."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm 100% certain. That is not Abdul Gafoor." Nura answered with a worried sigh.

They both stared at the man's dead body.

"That means…" Aditi left the sentence incomplete.

"It means that the third soul-transferor was inside this man's body…" Nura continued.

"And after claiming to be your father-"

"He entered my body and made me shoot this man so he couldn't give us any further information."

"And then he made you run outside so he could leave your body and enter another on the street."

Aditi turned to Nura, "But there isn't anybody nearby, so that means he didn't enter this man's body just now, he must have been in it from the moment I brought him from the school."

"The real question is; why did he pretend to be my father?"

Aditi thought for a while, "To create doubt." she muttered. "And it's working. How do we know for sure that you didn't just black out in rage and kill this man? That's equally plausible."

"Because he clearly isn't my father! His features are totally different."

"You only found that out now, after having a better look at him. What about before you shot him? You didn't verify it then. You just knew that a man claimed to be your father. It could be-"

"That still doesn't explain why a random guy would claim to be my father. What purpose would that serve?"

Aditi had no response. Deep-down she knew that Nura's explanation made logical sense, but that wasn't enough to keep her from doubting it.

"More so…" Nura continued, "How did this third soul-transferor know about my father even before entering my body? The only other people who know about him are you and Robin."

Aditi already knew the answer, but hesitated as she blurted out, "He has entered one of our bodies in the past and scanned our memories**.**" As Nura shot Aditi a look of fear mixed with anger, both the girls' hearts started pacing faster. As if in a hypnotic state, Nura began walking out slowly and climbed up the stairs to the banquet hall.

Aditi followed her once again. When they reached the hall, Nura fell on her knees and began weeping uncontrollably. Aditi ran towards her and held her by the shoulders.

"What the matter?"

Tears streamed from Nura's brown eyes as she sobbed profusely, "I can't… I can't do this anymore, Aditi. I'm sorry- I can't…"

Aditi was only waiting for the day when Nura would say those words. She took her head into her bosoms and patted it as Nura continued to wail.

27. *Their Goodbye*

Hearing the divine voice, I bowed down to the Goddess Saraswati, although she had not appeared in any visual form. The other scholars wept joys of happiness on hearing proof of the existence of the Goddess at the temple.

"O Holy Mother, I am honoured to hear your voice. But why do you stop me from ascending the throne?"

The disembodied voice replied, "My child, to sit on the throne, one must not only be all-knowing but must also be pure. Despite being a Sanyasa you had sexual relationships. Do you still believe yourself to be pure?"

I replied without hesitation "I have not committed any sin in this body. My present body is 'pure'. The sexual acts committed by me were in the body of another. Have my intentions always been pure? Yes. I only committed the act in order to gain knowledge. Does a person who has never seen an elephant but has described an elephant in intricate detail not learn something new when he finally sees one? Same it is with the experience with sex-love which is an integral part of nature. It was impossible for me to get the knowledge of such an important aspect without experiencing it. If I did not do so then I would not have not been all-knowing. If I am impure because of having sexual relations while in the body of another, then it means that being all-knowing as well as pure is a paradoxical state, and there is none who could sit on this throne."

Saraswati did not reply. Although I could not see her, I felt a warmth inside me and I knew that she was giving me a divine

smile. I sat on the throne. The scholars and I recited holy hymns all night.

The deadliest poison in the world is possibly paranoia. It can kill trust, love and even hope. Once it creeps in, it can make even the strongest of beings act in the most uncharacteristic manner. After all, it is nothing more than fear itself in its most concentrated form.

It had been only three days since Nura's breakdown, and she had already made arrangements to shift to Bangalore permanently. The bags were packed. All documents transferring her share in the motel to Aditi were signed and registered. All loose ends were tied. There was nothing left to do but wait for the cab to arrive, which would take Nura to the airport.

All members of Team Transferance were present in her room at Gupta Bhavan. The room was a tiny and simple one, but gave a homely feel. Robin, Nura, Aditi, Cyrus and Dante stood there in silence. Robin was in the body of an old stout man wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Nura was caressing Dante. All formalities were done except the final act of saying goodbye. Cyrus was the first to break the silence.

"So, what will you do in Bangalore?"

"Going to restart writing content. I've already gotten in touch with some of my older clients. Few are willing to hire me again. There won't be too much work at the start but I'm sure it will pick up in a couple of months. Till then I can practice using the speech-to-text software. I tried typing with one hand, but I don't think I'll ever be able to reach my earlier speeds." Again, there was silence. This time it was Nura who broke it, "I might visit my old house as well."

Nura already had the attention of everyone in the room, but with that last statement she even tickled their curiosity. This was one detail she didn't even tell Aditi and Robin.

"If my father is alive, I'll confront him."

"If you need any help, we are there." Aditi assured, "Simply call us and we'll come."

"Don't worry about me. I'm more worried about all of you. I'm leaving you at a very inopportune time, I-"

"We'll manage, Nura." Aditi reassured her, "Don't worry."

Nura checked her phone. She was tracking the cab on her app.

"The cab is reaching in one minute; I should make my way out."

Cyrus helped Nura with her luggage as they all walked out to the footpath outside the motel. The cab arrived and Aditi and Nura sat at the back. Aditi had earlier insisted that she would drop Nura to the airport. Once the cab left Robin proposed that he and Cyrus get a bite. Cyrus declined in a slightly impolite tone and left to run some errands, which left Robin puzzled.

***

The two girls reached the airport with plenty of time to spare. They decide to have a coffee at the café near the Delhi airport's departure gate. "Listen," Aditi told Nura, "There's something I have wanted to say for a long time…. I'm really sorry. About all of this." She pointed towards Nura's hand.

"Oh God! You and Robin are so similar! It's not either of your fault. I got myself into this. The last year and a half have brought out the best in me. I lost a hand, but I got something much more valuable – the

opportunity to make a difference. I don't think I'll ever be able to contribute more to society than the way I did when we were working together. But now I'm burnt out. I want some peace. I didn't tell anyone this, not even Robin, but…"

"What is it?"

"I was thinking of adopting Navya."

"Really?!"

"Yeah. I'll get the process started once I reach Bangalore."

"That's so cool! If you need any help just let me know."

"You have bigger things to worry about. Like this third soul-transferor. You have to be careful of your own colleagues. You never know when they are being possessed. Follow my instructions for social distancing. That's the only way you will be able to outsmart the new soul-transferor."

Aditi smiled, "I told Cyrus about it. He wasn't too happy. And I agree - it's too extreme! You want me to isolate myself and maintain a thirty-feet distance from everyone else… and that too for an indefinite period."

"I know it sounds crazy but it's the only way. Look, when someone like you enters the body of a normal person like me, we normal people have no memory of the time when you are inside us. I have told Cyrus as well to immediately inform you guys in case he ever has an experience of doing something and having no memory of it. That way you will know whether his memories have been leaked or not…. But what if the new guy enters you? You saw when Robin entered you,

you didn't even know about it! Although he couldn't control you, he could imbibe all your memories. That's too big a risk."

"But why just me? We don't know if someone can enter the body Robin is possessing and scan his memories. Shouldn't he be in isolation until we find out whether that's possible?"

"It's hard for anybody to track Robin since he keeps changing bodies. You on the other hand are easy to locate. But yes, you should experiment with Robin and try to find out more about your abilities and limitations. That knowledge will help you for whatever is coming next. We don't even know what the third soul-transferor's motives are. Is he just after you? If yes, then why? Or, do his plans involve causing harm to other people? Until this is over we need to be prepared."

"*'We'* need to be prepared?" Aditi smirked.

"Sorry. I meant *you*." Nura replied. "If Cyrus has to sleep alone for a few nights, so be it. As it is, it isn't like he was sharing the room with you a lot. When we were in Gurugram I could understand. But Panvel is only like an hour away from Mumbai and he still meets you just as infrequently as he did back then. What is his problem?"

"Yeah, he said his work in other cities has increased. So, he's travelling a lot. But yeah, I get what you are saying…" said Aditi sighed.

"Hey…Is everything okay?"

"Hmmm… Oh, yeah" Aditi hesitated, "It's just. I don't know about Cyrus and me."

"You think he isn't serious?"

“No, it’s the very opposite. I think I’m not, and it's just not Cyrus. In general, I’m feeling a bit… maybe, ‘numb’ is the right word. The other day when I killed those terrorists, I didn’t feel anything at all. It was strange. Before killing all of the Nine I had never taken a life before, so how did it feel easy? Shouldn’t I feel at least some sort of guilt?” Nura listened patiently, “And now with Cyrus, I’m not having the feelings I used to have. I don’t know.”

“Well, I have to admit you have changed a lot. You are no longer the old Aditi I could push around. In fact, I'm the one being bullied by you and Robin.” The girls giggled. “And how much do you read these days! When we aren’t on missions, I always find a book in your hand. You spend more on books in a week than you used to spend on Netflix every month earlier. You have matured. Maybe that’s it, you have changed and so has your taste for men.”

“You are right. But I feel it's not just that. I think the more my skills improve the more emotionally detached I am becoming. In the last three months, each time I laughed, it was forced. Each time I felt sympathy, sorrow or happiness, it was forced. My emotions were becoming numb, and now I think I barely feel anything- not even sexual desire.”

“I don’t think that it’s because you are becoming better at the transferance that’s affecting your emotional state. Rather, it’s probably because you have scanned so many memories. Obviously, that’s going to affect your moods and decision-making abilities. You need to take a transferance- detox. Don’t do it for a month. You will feel better. Remember how you had become before Robin joined us? Spacing out your missions worked didn’t it? Now you need to take it one step further.”

"If that's the case then Robin should be feeling much worse. He must have entered five times the number of bodies I have."

"How do you know it isn't affecting him?"

"Hummm, I guess you are right. I never met him before he started performing the transferance. It's very much possible that he doesn't feel emotions because-"

"He feels emotions." Nura interjected defensively and then hid behind her cup of coffee as she took a huge sip.

"Okay…. I'll take your word for it." There was a pause when they both just sipped their coffee. "It must be nice to be him." Aditi blurted out of nowhere.

Nura looked up at Aditi with an angry stare. But Aditi didn't notice. She wasn't making eye-contact with her.

"I have been thinking a lot about Robin's possible immortality. Also, I've been thinking about all the limitations on my abilities and the fact that my original body always has to be in proximity. Also, I have to maintain and preserve this body by sleeping and eating, which Robin doesn't have to worry about. All these limitations can be resolved if my original body were to be destroyed while my soul was in another body. I could live for a thousand years just hopping from one body to another until one of the bodies I'm possessing faced a death so sudden then it would not have the time or presence of mind to shift to another one. Wouldn't that be something?" When Aditi was done talking, she finally turned to Nura who had the worst scowl Aditi had ever seen. Her face had become red with fury.

"H…. How dare… you?" Nura muttered through her clenched teeth. "Do you think that it's easy to live the life that Robin is living?"

"No, I'm just…"

"That man is living in hell!" Nura fumed. Some of the patrons sitting at the nearby tables stared at the two women. "Despite his constant suffering, he continues to live, not for himself, but for the good of all mankind, and you have the audacity to envy him?"

"Nura, I was just saying that…"

"That poor man is under the mistaken belief that you are putting in genuine efforts to find a permanent body for him, but no! You don't want to help him get out of his predicament. In contrast, you want to use his condition in your favour. Not only that, you want to join him. Here I thought you had matured. But boy, was I mistaken!"

At this point, Aditi covered her face in both her hands and then held Nura's hands in her own, "You are right, you are absolutely right. It was wrong of me to even think in that manner. You see, this is how I am becoming. I need to try your "transferance-detox" idea. You are right. Can we forget this conversation ever happened? Please, just forget I said anything."

Nura exhaled and just stared at Aditi for a couple of seconds, before continuing to sip on her coffee. And just like that, the most intense conversation between the two best-friends was replaced by an awkward silence.

"And I promise. I will find a cure for Robin, I truly will."

Nura checked her wrist-watch, "It's time for me to check-in. Bye." Both of them stood up, and hugged each other. It was a cold and rushed hug, meant to be given only as a formality. Nura avoided eye-contact through-out and walked away dragging her trolley bag behind her.

Aditi remembered the famous poem written in the 16th century by the Indian poet Abdul Rahim Khan-Khanan in which he says that *one must never allow the thread of love to break. If it breaks once it cannot be restored to its previous form. You can reconnect them by tying the broken ends together but there will always be the knot in the middle.*

'Did our thread just break?' Aditi thought.

She watched her continuously hoping she would turn back one last time to wave or just to check whether Aditi was still standing there. But she did not.

***

The incident with Nura played over and over in Aditi's mind as she rode back to Gupta Bhavan. As soon as she reached home, an old man with discoloured skin patches and a walking stick slowly answered the door.

"It's me. Pumpernickel." said Robin. "Something has happened."

"What now?"

"Look at this." Robin handed her a newspaper. Aditi took it in her hands and read the headline 'Six Killed in Explosion at the National Chemicals Laboratory'.

"You think this was an act of terrorism, but why attack a chemical laboratory? It's probably just an accident."

"No. The entire lab didn't explode. Just a part of it. A part which was being used by a special division, in which I used to work."

"A special division?"

"Yes. A division that worked on synthesizing a drug which could accelerate brain function exponentially. Once me and another

colleague of mine – Vijay Tripathi realized exactly what we were working on and the military applications it was intended for and we had a heated argument with our superiors. We wanted them to kill the project, but instead they fired us. Our contracts with NCL contained a NDA, so we could never go public with it. After my death, I went to the lab to check if they were the ones responsible for the collision that killed my family. They weren't. But I learnt that they had synthesized a version of the drug that had a one-in-ten chance of working. The remaining nine-in-ten times where it caused death" Robin leaned forward and held Aditi's shoulder, "NCL was too incompetent. But imagine if someone with resources and a better team got their hands on it…"

The gravity of the situation dawned on Aditi, "You are right, we need to stop it before it gets spread so wide that it's beyond our control. What's the name of the drug? I'll tell Cyrus to check if anyone is trying to sell it on the dark web."

"It's called Fotura… Aditi?"

Aditi's face had turned white. Her eyes had fallen on a tiny column at the corner of the page. The headline was a generic one which they used for all standard cases of suicide. But it was the name of a certain building which was mentioned in the article that had caught her attention. It was a three-sentence article which simply read as follows: *"A twenty-eight-year-old girl was found dead in her apartment in Shabbir Niwas, Gurugram. Neighbours complained of a strong stench coming from her apartment and discovered her hanging from the ceiling fan. Preliminary findings suggested that she had hung herself eight days before her body was found."*

"Aditi, all okay?"

"Yeah… It's just that a friend of mine lives in this building, Shabbir Niwas, which is mentioned in this article. I think Nura and I have spoken about her to you… Do you remember that office colleague of mine - Dhwani Mehta?"

28. *Their Encounter with Them*

I climbed Mount Kailasa. When I reached the top, Lord Shiva and his consort the Goddess Parvathi appeared before me in their composite half-male and half-female form called "Ardhanareeswara".

I recited hymns for them. They looked at me, and told me that they appreciated my work of giving the world a better understanding of the Universal Truth. They blessed me and presented me with five crystal Lingams (symbols of Lord Shiva) and instructed me to arrange for the worship of the Lingams for the sake of the welfare of the universe. They also gave me instructions on the mode of worship of these Lingams, called "Soundaryalahiri" which was written on a palm leaf and handed over to me.

I bowed and took their leave.

Ranveer Kapadia waited in the ante-chamber of Suketu Singh's home-office at Pune. He wore a lavender coloured silk shirt with a sports jacket over it. He thought that it made him look like a legitimate businessman. But his face, which had a scar stretching from his right ear to his mouth, gave him away.

Accompanying Ranveer was his colleague, Kiran Sharma, a lanky person with short hair and a determined look, holding a black five-by-eight-inch case. Kiran wore a jacket over a V-neck sweater and a white shirt inside that.

One of Suketu's attendant-cum-bodyguards emerged from his chamber. He was dressed like a typical body guard – black suit, black sunglasses and a white ear-piece.

"Good morning, my name is Rahul. Mr. Singh will see you now."

Ranveer and Kiran both stood up.

The bodyguard stopped them, "Sorry. But only you can come in, Mr. Kapadia. Ever since the recent cases of mysterious disappearances, we have been taking precautions."

"Kiran goes where I go. As a fellow bodyguard I'm sure you know how it is. Also, we both were frisked at the entrance. There's nothing to worry about."

"I understand, sir. But these are the rules. He will have to –" It was at this point that Rahul got a better look at Kiran, and doubted whether he was right in referring to Kiran as 'he'.

Kiran clarified, "My pronouns are 'they', 'them' and 'their'."

The guard did not understand what that statement meant.

Ranveer turned to Kiran, "It's okay. Give me the case."

Kiran handed over the case to him reluctantly.

Rahul opened the wooden door for Ranveer. They had now entered a twenty-feet long corridor with four security guards on either side, whose attire matched that of Rahul's. Ranveer checked out their stoic faces as he followed Rahul to the end of the corridor. Rahul knocked on the door twice and, without waiting for a response, he swung it open and beckoned Ranveer to step in.

Inside, Suketu Singh sat at a glass table, with his back facing the window. He was playing "Kwazy Kupcakes" on his phone. Upon seeing his visitor, he put the phone down. "Welcome, Ranveer!" he extended his hand forward as Rahul locked the door from the inside and stood at the back of the room. "How have you been? Sorry about all the frisking and other security measures. There isn't any option than being too careful in these strange times. Influential people dying across the country and all."

"Don't worry about it, I totally get it. I recently hired a personal bodyguard myself." He sat down in front of Suketu.

"Oh! Where is the chap? He must be something if the great Ranveer Kapadia picked him."

"*They* are outside."

"Sorry? They? You got more than one?"

"No."

Suketu didn't understand. Rahul shook his head at him indicating that the topic wasn't worth probing any further.

"Okay. So, let's get down to business. Did you bring the stuff?"

"Yes, I did!" he placed the black case on the table and opened it. Suketu looked in awe at the two dozen tiny vials of blue liquid presented to him. Even Rahul tried to take a peek from the back of the room."

"So, this is *Fotura*." Suketu remarked, "This is the reason you broke into, and destroyed, the National Chemical Laboratory? That was quite an explosion. I heard it killed the entire team who knew anything about the drug."

Ranveer smiled, "Are you wearing a wire, Suketu?"

Suketu laughed. "Okay. I don't care how you got it. But tell me how it works?"

"It's simple. Each of these vials contains ten millilitres of Fotura. By drinking an entire vial your brain activity increases ten-fold within seconds. You can think and move faster. It will seem like the world around you is moving in slow motion. You'll even be able to dodge bullets. It also strengthens your senses. You can hear a butterfly flapping its wings and see a dust particle from across a room."

"By God! I don't believe this. Sounds like something out of a movie."

"You want a demonstration?"

"Yes, that would be lovely!"

"Kiran!" Ranveer shouted out loud, startling Suketu and Rahul. When nothing happened, they both looked at him, confounded.

Ranveer assured them, "Just wait for it." They heard a huge thud coming from the corridor followed by some random sounds of things being beaten. When finally, a gunshot was heard, Rahul opened the door. Kiran entered the room leaving behind all the guards in the corridor who were lying motionless on the ground. "Don't worry." Kiran said, "They aren't dead. Only unconscious."

Suketu applauded and cheered as Kiran showed him an empty vial. "Whoa! This is something. Okay I want these. Transferring the money to your account right away. How long do the effects last?"

"About twenty minutes." Ranveer replied.

"And any side effects? Does the user end up like your friend?"

Ranveer was more offended by the question than Kiran was, but he remained calm. “Kiran’s gender has nothing to do with the drug. The drug has no side-effects.”

“Good to hear.” Suketu picked up his phone and after pressing a few buttons continued, “Done. I have transferred you the one crore that we discussed over the phone. It should be hitting your account now.”

Ranveer got a text alert. He checked it. The amount had been credited to his account. He nodded, “Pleasure doing business.”

“Wait a minute.”

“What is it?”

“How about some fun?”

Ranveer shrugged his shoulers. “What did you have in mind?”

“A small wager. Your bloodhound drank the Fotura. Let my Rahul drink one from my supply, and let’s have a sparring match between both of them. If your fighter wins I’ll pay you an extra crore. If mine wins you have to give me one more case of Fotura. What say?”

Ranveer considered it for a moment. “You are on.”

Suketu handed Rahul a vial of the blue liquid, which Rahul drank without any prompting. He was amazed by what Kiran just did.

Ranveer and Suketu stood at the side with their backs facing the window. The two fighters stood opposite each other in their respective fighting stances “Begin!” Suketu shouted out loud.

In two seconds, Kiran held Rahul’s head and snapped his neck. Rahul’s body fell to the floor.

"Rahul! No, how could this happen?!" Suketu checked if Rahul was still breathing, "Why didn't the Fotura work for him the way it did for you?" he asked Kiran. But Kiran was busy retrieving a gun from one of the unconscious guards lying in the corridor.

Ranveer responded, "That's because Kiran has never used Fotura their entire life. They are all-natural. Don't worry, your man isn't dead." Kiran handed over the gun to Ranveer, who quickly shot Rahul in the back. "But he is now."

"No, that can't be. If so, that means Fotura doesn't work."

"Of course, it does. One out of ten times…But what I gave you wasn't really Fotura. Just water with blue dye…"

"Why, you basta-"

Rahul shot Suketu in the head, killing him instantly.

The two of them walked across the unconscious guards and left the room.

***

Team Transferance, which consisted of only four members now, reached Pune in Cyrus' Mercedes. It had been a little over two weeks since Nura left Robin, Cyrus, Aditi and Dante to fend for themselves. They were managing without her, but their work wasn't up to the mark. It was even harder since Aditi was undergoing her detox and was only entering other bodies in absolute emergencies. It was also because of the detox that Aditi's emotions were resurfacing, which coupled with the news of Dhwani's death, put her in a state of perpetual gloom. She blamed herself in part for not aiding Dhwani despite being fully aware of her depression. In guilt, she immersed

herself in researching on depressing and even read Steve Goldblum's 'The Little Book on Dealing with Depression and Anxiety' cover-to-cover.

Through Cyrus' research they were able to learn that a man named Ranveer Kapadia was travelling across cities claiming to be selling Fotura in the black market. They also tracked down his credit card usage and found out he was living at a hotel in Pune. Although they knew where he was, they had no plan in place. They decided to book a room on the same floor as his and play it by ear.

They checked into the room at about 12.30 p.m. Once inside the hotel room, Aditi entered the body of the bellhop who carried the bags to their room. She then gathered a tray and some coffee from the pantry and brought it up to Ranveer's room. The door was opened by a man, or a woman, or neither – Aditi couldn't tell for sure. There was a man in a bathrobe sitting on the bed, whom she recognized from photos Cyrus showed her as Ranveer "Did you order some coffee?"

"No. We did not." Saying this they closed the door.

Aditi went back to the room where Robin, Cyrus and Dante were waiting for her. "How did it go?" Cyrus asked.

"Weird. Ranveer didn't answer the door. It was someone else… Seemed androgynous. But Ranveer was in the room."

"Did the he-she look like this?" Cyrus asked, showing Aditi a photo on the screen.

"Yes, it was."

"Yeah, it's Kiran Sharma…A hired assassin. During my research, I did hear whispers that he or she was working with Ranveer fas a full-time bodyguard. But I wasn't sure. Kiran isn't one to be trifled with."

Aditi was impressed with Cyrus' research skills.

"I guess it's my turn now." Robin said as he lay on the bed and closed his eyes. He focused in the direction of Ranveer Kapadia's room.

Memories of Ranveer Kapadia hit him. He learnt that Ranveer had indeed been responsible for the destruction of NCL. Ranveer had stolen Fotura from there, but the quantity was too small – barely more than half a litre. He stole the data from the NCL computers and handed over both –the stolen drugs and the data to his own personal research team who tried to reverse engineer it in a lab at Bangalore. Ranveer was smart. He actually sat with the research team and understood the progress and challenges in synthesizing the drug. They had come really close but he needed funds to continue. That's when he got an idea. Word was already spreading in the black market that he was in possession of Fotura. He decided to go around taking money under the pretext of selling the drug, and eliminating the buyers once the money was received in his account. He hired Kiran Sharma, an assassin with special skills. Kiran was the perfect candidate since they perpetually resembled someone who was already on Fotura.

Once the memories were over, Robin found himself sitting in a bathrobe on his hotel room bed. He could hear someone in the shower. He decided to take this opportunity to report back to the others. He rushed out in his robe, walked across the hallway, from which a confused bellhop had just exited, and knocked rapidly on Team Transferance's room door. Aditi answered, "What happened?"

"It's bad." He said as he stepped in. Dante got alert on seeing the new visitor, but went back to resting when he realized it was just Robin. "Ranveer doesn't have Fotura on him right now. But he has most of the data required to prepare it. He has a team in Bangalore trying to reverse engineer the formula. What do we do now?"

Cyrus shrugged his shoulders, "Obviously, we have to destroy the samples he has…."

"It's not that simple. He also has a lot of the data about it which he stole from NCL's database. Plus, he's studied it. He and two of the chemists in his team *know* a lot about Fotura. Even if we manage to destroy all of their own research and the data that they stole from NCL, there's a still a chance they can arrive at the formula and could synthesize Fotura in the future -"

"What if we get him and his team arrested on something?" Aditi asked.

"They can still leak the information they have, especially the two chemists. It's too big a secret to keep and the information is too valuable to waste. They would definitely sell the info or pass it along somehow. I think that so long as they are alive, there is always the danger of Fotura being synthesized by private parties or governments."

Aditi understood the ethical dilemma. Robin was indirectly asking her permission to kill Ranveer. Cyrus and Robin both waited for her answer.

"Let's go to Bangalore and destroy all traces of Fotura first. We will erase all the hard disks, the equipment, everything, and we'll take

Ranveer with us. If we don't know what to do with him once your twenty-four hours in his body are done, then I will possess his body."

"Ranveer Kapadia is a wanted criminal and it isn't possible anymore for him to travel by flight – international or domestic. You guys go ahead by flight. I'll catch up."

Aditi waited for Cyrus to object to this idea and was mildly surprised when he didn't. Therefore, she had to say, "No, Kiran will come looking for you. It isn't safe. You better travel with us. Also, we'll need Ranveer's memories to draw up a plan on infiltrating the lab."

***

In order to avoid bumping into Kiran Sharma, Robin – who was in Ranveer Kapadia's body, escaped the hotel from the window. He met up with Aditi, Cyrus and Dante in Cyrus' Mercedes.

With all the restroom and food breaks the entire road trip took a little over twenty-two hours. Cyrus and Aditi took shifts driving. Robin never droves, he avoided it ever since the collision that killed his family. Cyrus made the motel bookings en route where they could set up base. They also devised a plan in which Aditi would take charge of Ranveer's body from Robin and she would enter the lab and direct the chemists and their staff to destroy the equipment and erase the hard disks under the pretexts that they were about to be busted by law enforcement. Cyrus would wait for them in the motel room. Robin and Cyrus tried to bring up the issue of how to deal with Ranveer once they were done, but Aditi avoided the topic.

Unbeknownst to the others, she sent Nura a text which read as under:

'Hi. We are coming to Bangalore and should be arriving by 11 a.m. tomorrow. We'll be staying at the Shiv Sagar Motel and our room is booked under the pseudonym Ashok Kumar. Do come to visit if you are free.'

There was no response to the message.

They reached the parking lot of Shiv Sagar motel, got out of Cyrus' Mercedes and walked towards the lobby. The parking lot was an abandoned one, which was in accordance with the décor of the motel. Aditi and Robin led the way while Cyrus pulled out the red suitcase for Aditi's body from the trunk and followed them.

"So, we'll spend some time in the room until Robin has an escaping-episode. Once I take over Ranveer's body…" Dante had begun barking loudly out of nowhere. Aditi turned around to check what had happened. She stopped in her tracks, which caused Robin to stop as well. He followed Aditi's line of sight and saw a stern Kiran Sharma standing upright. At Kiran's feet was Cyrus lying motionless on the ground with the red suitcase lying next to him.

"Cyrus!" yelled Aditi but she hesitated to go to him. Kiran could take her out in a second.

Dante continued to bark at Kiran, until Kiran looked him in the eyes. For some reason Dante became calm and quiet. Kiran then turned to the other two, "Don't worry, he's just unconscious."

Robin quickly realized he had to get into character, "Kiran, what do you think you-"

"Don't bother. I know you aren't Ranveer. You are the one they call Kalki."

'There's only one thing to do.' Aditi thought as she was about to shut her eyes to enter Kiran's body. Without any indication from her, Robin got

ready to defend Aditi while she prepared for the transferance and to catch her body when it fell to the ground.

"There's no need for that." Kiran yelled. Aditi opened her eyes. "I come in peace."

She looked at Kiran from head to toe. "If you come in peace then let my friend look after Cyrus."

Kiran nodded.

"Robin, put Cyrus in the red suitcase and check in. Go to the room and take care of him. Take Dante with you. I'll join you upstairs, shortly."

"Are you sure?" he asked without taking his eyes off Kiran.

"Yes, go now!"

"I'd rather speak to Kalki if that's okay." Looking at Ranveer.

"We both are Kalki." Aditi replied immediately.

Kiran turned to her and nodded indicating that Aditi was worthy of having a conversation with them. "I had deduced from the news reports that there were two of you. It's nice to know that my theory was correct."

Meanwhile, Robin approached Cyrus' body, unzipped the suitcase, placed Cyrus' body inside and closed the suitcase, all the while maintaining eye contact with Kiran. He dragged the suitcase out of the parking lot, which was difficult since he was already wearing his backpack stuffed with his essential supplies. When he noticed Dante wasn't following him, he beckoned for him and Dante dutifully obeyed.

Kiran and Aditi stared at each other, maintaining a poker face. Kiran was the one who broke the silence.

"I don't want to get in your way. I know what will happen if Fotura gets into the hands of the public. So many people with superhuman abilities. That would be chaos."

"Then why follow us here?"

"I just wanted to make sure Ranveer was safe, and that he will continue to be safe. I want your word that he won't be harmed. That's it."

"What is he to you?"

"Nothing. He just hired me. I am under a contract with him. Or at least I was… But I'm resigning now. Not just from his employment but from the entire protection scene."

"What will you do?"

Kiran let out a soft chuckle which was the closest thing to an emotional response that Aditi was able to elicit from them. "I don't know, I am thinking of taking a small break, might travel a bit. But let's not digress, do I have your word that Ranveer will not be physically harmed?"

"If he's just an employer, then why do you care?"

"He was different. The only one who didn't look at me weirdly and who stood up for me, although I didn't need anyone standing up for me."

"My colleague Robin told me a bit about you."

"He researched me?"

"Didn't have to. Once he entered Ranveer's body he was able to see his memories. We know what your abilities are, but I don't know anything about you. Who trained you? Are your abilities even natural? And why…"

"I think we both have a lot of questions about each other's abilities… But let's talk about it some other time. I'm sure you and I will meet again someday. People like us can't avoid each other."

"People like us?"

"Do we have a deal or not? About Ranveer?"

Aditi wanted to probe further but Kiran didn't seem in the mood to divulge. "I don't kill people. No harm will come to Ranveer. You have my word."

Kiran nodded. "You want a lift to the lab?"

"I have to wait for my colleagues."

"You don't need them. You don't even need to use your abilities. You and I can do it together. Come on, we'll take my car, go in and be out in about twenty minutes. Hey, don't worry, I don't kill either."

For some reason Aditi could not say no to Kiran, although she was against the idea. This was perhaps because she was terrified of them. She followed Kiran to the car. Kiran drove as she sat in the passenger seat. As soon as they started, she called Cyrus over the cell. When it was answered she heard Ranveer's voice on the other side, "Hi Aditi, Robin here. All okay?"

"Yes Robin. Listen, Kiran and I are going ahead to the lab. Need you to take care of Cyrus."

"You and Kiran?"

"Yeah, it's a bit hard to explain, I will tell you everything once I'm back. In case you have an escaping episode,"

"I'll manage. I know the drill. I will tie myself or use anaesthetic. Don't worry, I'll figure something out."

"Okay. Take care."

"You too."

They both hung up. Robin looked at Cyrus who was lying on the bed. He always felt a contempt for Cyrus, although he didn't understand why. Hewas clear that it wasn't jealousy. Robin admired Aditi, but like a mentor. There was no logical reason for his contempt.

As he pulled out the rope from his backpack and wondered what it was about Cyrus that he despised,] he felt a feeling of uneasiness. Robin was having an episode. He quickly rummaged through his bag and pulled out his bottle containing his customized anaesthetic and a handkerchief. He soaked the handkerchief in the liquid and sniffed it. He knew he only had a few seconds to perform the transferance and enter the body of someone in the neighbouring rooms, but he accidently injected too much. He began feeling dizzy and he fell on the bed, right next to Cyrus. Robin could hear Dante barking, but the sound of his barking began to deafen.

29. *Their Guru*

I was given a boon in the form of the five crystal Lingams and the Soundaryalahiri which was written on a palm leaf. However, no boon is without challenge. As I descended Mount Kailasa, Nandi, the sacred bull and guardian of Kailasa saw me with the Lingams and the Soundaryalahiri. He thought I was stealing them!

He charged towards me. I managed to dodge, but a part of the palm leaf was caught in one of his horns and it tore half-way. Nandi's eyes fell on the torn palm leaf stuck on his horn and got so mesmerized with the fifty-one stanzas of Soundaryalahiri contained in it that he continued to run, forgetting about me entirely.

I left with the five crystal Lingams and the other forty-nine stanzas of the Soundaryalahiri. I was sad that I lost half of it. Since I had not opened it, I had no idea what the missing stanzas were. I prayed in my sleep, where Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathi came before me and recited the verses that I had lost. I woke up, content.

A fourteen-year-old Gangadhar was sitting with his legs folded in a huge stone hall facing his guru – Guru Parada. Guru Parada, known as "Guruji" by the people of the village including his son and nephew, sat on a stone slab one meter above ground level with his one leg folded and one leg dangling down the front side of the slab. On Gangadhar's right was Vimal, another disciple who was also draped in orange robes. Their backs faced the door of the hall which opened to the village of Shankarpur in the kingdom of Gwalior. On either side behind Guruji, there were two doors which led to the inner-chamber of the temple, which housed a seven-feet tall idol of the goddess Durga.

The Temple was open to the public, but there were barely more than two or three worshippers there at a time, except during festivals when the place was packed. Guruji stayed at the temple most of the time and only occasionally visited the hut in which his wife lived along with his nephew – Gangadhar, and son – Vimal.

On that particular day, Guruji was giving a sermon to the children on the limitless power that lied in every living being. He gave the children examples of fakirs who were buried for decades and unburied years later only to be found alive. He spoke of Sanyasas who had developed the skill of walking on water. Lastly, he gave a dozen examples of sages who meditated for years till the Gods themselves descended from heaven to grant them boons. This included the story of Sage Uttanga who was granted a boon by Lord Krishna that he would never be thirsty. Guruji narrated the tale of Bhasmasur for hours- who was granted the power to burn up and immediately turn into ashes anyone whose head he touched with his hand.

The boys listened to these stories with skepticism. Yes, they knew that their Guru was able to transfer his soul temporarily to another body. But that was the only super-natural occurrence they observed in their lives. Gangadhar, in particular, knew that simply because one story was true, it did not mean that they all were. '*Why would anyone who was given a boon wish for anything except immortality? Wishing that you would never feel thirsty –what a joke!'* he thought.

Guruji had a deep, baritone voice and as he spoke his voice echoed throughout the ante-chamber. The resulting tranquility was enough to put anyone in a trance. Gangadhar could swear that even the eight stone pillars of the chamber vibrated in complete harmony with the sound waves bouncing off the stone walls. Guruji spoke in the language of the Gods – Sanskrit.

The sermon ended. However, the children were not given leave to disperse. Gangadhar did not know whether it was because of the exceptionally beautiful weather or the fact that Guruji had added extra *ganja* in his pipe that day – but for some reason Guruji decided to

show off some of his skills to the disciples. He asked the children if they wanted to see something special. The children nodded. Guruji then closed his eyes and began taking deep breaths. Gangadhar watched closely. He knew something very interesting was about to happen. At the same time, he was afraid. Whenever Guruji went into a meditative state there was a chance that he would enter someone else's body. It had been a long time since Guruji ever entered Vimal or Gangadhar's body, but he could choose to do so any time. Vimal and Gangadhar both assumed that he refrained from doing so out of respect for their privacy. Gangadhar did not want to risk it. He had done some things that were specifically against the rules set by Guruji and if Guruji were to read his thoughts and find them out, he would surely be punished. With Vimal's help, he began developing a mental technique by which he would try and suppress certain memories. He was able to successfully suppress certain memories from Vimal but he wasn't sure if the technique would work when Guruji took over his body. He had no other option but to try his luck. Whenever he would see Guruji meditating, he would prepare his mind to suppress the incriminating memories.

Suddenly, Gangadhar found himself standing in the open field outside the temple. He looked around in shock and bewilderment. Had Guruji just taken over his body and led him outside? If so, what would be the novelty in that? He had seen Guruji take over people's bodies countless times.

"Gangadhar!" came a voice from above. Gangadhar looked up, above the roof of the temple. It was Vimal. When they saw each other, they instantly realized what had just happened. Gangadhar rushed back inside the temple, and Vimal climbed down using the grooves in the

carvings on the beams for foot placement. Gangadhar climbed up the steps of the temple and Vimal climbed down the temple and they both reached the temple door at the same time. They saw Guruji still sitting in the same place, resuming to smoke his pipe, with a smug grin.

"Guruji, how did you do that?" Gangadhar asked enthusiastically "You took over both our bodies at the same time!?"

With one hand Guruji beckoned both of them to sit and after taking a long drag, he began to explain, "I hope you children found that entertaining. There is a very thin line between a man who is worshipped and a man who is chased away by stones. If I were to tell the people the full extent of my power, no doubt there would be those who would try to finish me off in fear of me ever misusing them."

The children hung onto every word.

"My younger brother, Pancha and I both studied '*parakayapravesavidya*' – the art of transferring one's soul to the body of another. When our parents died, we both decided to leave our house and move into the forest. Within a short time, news had spread about two sages with the power to enter other people's bodies. We drew the attention of Man Singh Tomar - the then ruler of Gwalior. He summoned us to his palace. We didn't want to agitate the King so we duly complied. We thought he only wanted us to present our skills. But when we went to the palace, we weren't permitted to meet the King, but rather were interviewed by his ministers. It's then that we realized that the only reason we were called was so that they could ascertain whether we could use our powers for the good of the kingdom. It also struck me that the King had refused to see us in person because he was afraid of us.

"My younger brother and I both told the council of ministers that we were ascetics and that we would never engage in politics or war, whether it be for the kingdom of Gwalior or against it. They were not happy but at the same time they were satisfied that we would not use our powers *against* the kingdom. They offered us a special status by giving us houses in this village which is part of Gwalior kingdom. Obviously, it was so that we could remain under their supervision and to ensure that we never allied with any rival kingdom.

"We accepted the offer since we were both thinking of settling down anyway. At this village we both got married. Two years later Gangadhar was born to my brother and his wife. A year after that Vimal was born. As you know, in the same year Pancha and his wife both passed away. After that, I developed the ability to split my soul into multiple parts. I have experimented with the power and have been able to occupy more than one thousand three hundred people at a time. But until today I have never told anybody about the soul-splitting ability. You two are the first. Imagine controlling multiple bodies simultaneously. With self-training and practice I could take over tens of thousands of people and be my own army as well as my own subjects. I could control the population, the economy – everything. That's why I had to keep it a secret from the world. I just could not…."

Gangadhar, whose eyes had by now lit up like *diyas*[16], interjected, "Could you see the memories of all the people whose bodies you entered?"

[16] Oil lamp made out of clay.

"Yes" replied Guruji, "I could possess all subjects known to mankind. Since I would not be limited to only one human brain, I would not have to worry about having an overload of knowledge and I would not have headaches."

"And you could live forever, right? Even if your original body were destroyed?"

"Theoretically, yes. But you can do that even without soul-splitting. If your soul were possessing another body while your original body was destroyed, you could -"

"Yes, but if any of the body's occupied by the soul had a sudden death, then the soul would die. If there were no time for you to transfer your soul to another body, and let's say a huge boulder fell on you, or you were hit in the head by an adversary, then you would die. Just like my father did. But with the soul splitting technique that won't be a problem since thousands of people couldn't die a sudden death simultaneously. It would be true immortality. Plus, you could take over every leader in the world and…"

"And if I were to take over everyone then that would be playing God." Guruji interjected aggressively, "If the Gods wanted men to be puppets, then we would be controlled by him all the time. But God lets us live, only guiding and nudging us when required. Also-" Guruji took another drag from his pipe "your father didn't die because he didn't have time to transfer to another body. Your father and I both never wanted to take over other people's lives. And we both never wanted to live beyond our time. I know the soul spitting technique, but I refuse to use it to prolong my life. Our souls have to pass on to the other world so that the cosmic cycle can continue. None of us are above that."

"How does one do the soul splitting technique?" Gangadhar inquired, not wanting Guruji to proceed with another long-drawn sermon.

"It cannot be taught." Guruji sighed with exasperation, "I will tell you more about it some other day."

Vimal and Gangadhar were dismissed.

Guruji never discussed the soul slitting technique again. Gangadhar and Vimal occasionally tried to probe more into it, but he never disclosed anything.

***

"You are getting married too young." Gangadhar told Vimal as they walked around the vast paddy fields at the outskirts of the village, after their archery lessons.

"We are sixteen. All other men our age are already married" Vimal responded. "Also, Devika's parents have been pushing for the marriage ever since our parents got us engaged four years ago."

"Your carnal desires cloud your judgment."

Vimal was offended "It is not a carnal desire for which I am getting married. Besides, Devika and you both know that engaging in such activities would mean dishonouring one of our precepts. *'No sexual activity for seven years'*. That's what we promised Guruji. There are still two years remaining."

Gangadhar let out an exasperated sigh.

"Who are you to taunt me about carnal desires anyway?" Vimal responded "You, who visit a brothel outside the kingdom every time you say you are going on a pilgrimage."

"How do you know about that?"

Vimal smirked. "I heard a rumour, but you just confirmed it."

"Are you going to tell Guruji?"

"What makes you think I haven't already?"

Gangadhar shot him a dirty look.

"I haven't… Although if he were to ask me then as per the precepts, I would be compelled to tell him the truth. You are just lucky he hasn't entered your body recently otherwise he would know each and every one of your misdeeds. Like how you took over the body of the kingdom's treasurer and made him drink so much tree sap that he had diarrhea for two weeks."

"The treasurer was a mother beater and a thief. All I did was pass justice on him. Something Guruji should be doing" Gangadhar stopped walking to take a deep breath and admire the beauty of the fields. "Vimal, don't you think someone with Guruji's powers should take steps to ensure that our society functions smoothly. I have time and again tried to convince him to use his powers or at least allow us to use ours' to bring about a positive change. We deserve to be kings. Especially with the soul splitting technique, we could rule the world without even spilling a drop of blood. We would simply have to take over anybody who opposed us. There would be no need for any conflict. Our world would be a utopia."

"Not this again! What would be the point of that? It would be a temporary solution. We would just be a crutch for society. They would never be able to function properly without us."

"Why would they have to function without us?"

"Come on, we would have to die eventually."

"I don't see why we would have to." remarked Gangadhar as he turned his back and continued to walk.

***

Months later, an epidemic broke out in Shankarpur village. Vimal and Devika were both infected. Gangadhar and his wife, Uttarika stayed with Vimal and Devika the entire time and tended to their needs. Each day their condition worsened. It was clear that they did not have too many days left. Guruji was kept apprised of their condition, but he never even once came to visit them. Gangadhar begged Vimal to use the soul-transfer technique to possess another body, so that he may continue to live even after his physical body succumbs to the disease. "What good would that do, Gangadhar?" Vimal asked "Devika cannot perform the soul-transfer technique, and I have no interest in living without her. I may have only been able to live with her for a few short months… but I definitely intend to die with her."

Gangadhar never breached the subject again. Vimal and Devika both died on the same day. That very night Gangadhar rushed to the temple.

***

"You wretched scum!" Gangadhar shouted as he entered the temple.

"What did you say?" Guruji bellowed. He had just sat on the ground to have his dinner, which was laid out on a banana leaf.

"You have become so detached from your family and society that you no longer feel anything. Despite knowing that your song and

daughter-in-law were close to death you couldn't be bothered to take a twenty-minute walk to visit them."

Guruji sighed. "My presence will make no difference. Only God can save them now."

"God hasn't saved them. They both died a half an hour ago."

On hearing this news Guruji stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes. He sat there as if his life had just left his body.

"What? Why don't you speak now?" Gangadhar continued.

Guruji opened his now watery eyes. "Leave."

"What?"

"I have lost one of my sons and you have done nothing but bring me shame. I know all about your misdeeds. Leave now! Leave this village and don't you dare ever come back. And if I ever hear you misusing your powers then I will myself ensure the departure of your soul from this world."

Gangadhar stormed off.

***

It had been days since Vimal's death. Guruji grieved for a night then went about his daily routine. One day as Guruji was taking a bath at the banks of the Sindhu River, an arrow pierced the back of his shoulder. Before he could react another arrow flew towards him and pierced through his skull, killing him immediately.

Gangadhar walked towards his lifeless body, and watched as the blood poured out from its body and mixed with the waters of the river. He touched the neck of the corpse to make sure he was dead. He

then threw Guruji's body into the river along with his bow and remaining arrows and made his way to Guruji's house.

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Gangadhar hid in the bushes and watched Guruji's wife, Uttarika, as she was going about her daily chores. Killing her would be a simple task for him. But there was something that had to be done first. He sat there meditating and in less than a minute he found himself in her mind. She had led a pretty ordinary life, and her days passed in doing chores. Gangadhar waited to find the information he was interested in, knowing fully well that there was a chance that she did not have it at all.

In her memories he saw how Guruji and his younger brother, Pancha, both enjoyed a special status in Gwalior. Pancha got married immediately after the Guruji did, to a woman named Shamila. A year after Gangadhar was born Pancha got terribly sick and passed away. After the funeral, Guruji came home late in the evening after attending his brother's funeral. A one-year-old Gangadhar was wrapped in sheets and lying on the cot at the corner of their little hut. Guruji's wife was eight-months pregnant at the time with Vimal, because of which she was unable to attend the funeral. Shamila was also three months pregnant, but she did not have the option of missing her late husband's funeral. She left her first born child, Gangadhar, in Uttarika's care.

"How was the funeral?" she inquired as she handed him a *lota*[17] of water.

[17] Polished brass water pot.

"The worst has happened, Uttarika."

"Something worse than what happened yesterday?"

"After I set fire to the funeral pyre, Shamila came to me and slapped me."

"She slapped you?! How dare she?"

"Uttarika, there is something I have not told you." Guruji took a deep breath, "I have told you about a technique in our family known as the soul splitting technique. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I did not tell you how it is to be achieved. There are two ways, both of which require a huge sacrifice to be made. As you know, it is believed that our family are descendants of the children of King Amaruka, who were conceived during the month when his body was possessed by the great Sanyasa. This is why we have called ourselves "Amarukas". For centuries, our powers laid dormant until one of our ancestors discovered the soul-transfer technique. Since then, they have experimented and tried to push the boundaries of their powers. As a result of their experimentation the soul-splitting technique was discovered. Our mother had told Pancha and me that in order to achieve the power to split one's soul, the soul of one person must be sacrificed and be absorbed by another. Then the one who has absorbed the soul of the other can split his soul and enter multiple bodies at the same time."

Uttarika listened intently. She did not know where Guruji was going with the discussion, but she found it fascinating nonetheless.

"Needless to say, both the soul-donor and the soul-donee must be Amarukas and they both must be proficient in the soul-transfer technique. The more proficient they both are, the more the number of bodies the merged soul can possess simultaneously. For the soul absorption, the soul-donor must voluntarily and willingly surrender his soul to the soul donee. Or at least so we thought…. On her deathbed our mother told us one more method by which the soul absorption could be done by taking another person's soul - by force. But that is not relevant for now."

"What does this have to do with today's funeral?"

"Yesterday, I was at Pancha's house. He was breathing his last..."

"No!" shouted Uttarika in disbelief, she seemed to have drawn a conclusion already. "No, please tell me that you didn't!"

"Do you think I could? No, I didn't. Not by force. Pancha himself said that he wanted to merge with me. He thought that if he merged with my own soul, he could attain a state of tranquility and that both our souls could attain moksha together. I tried to talk him out of it, but deep down even I could not see myself being parted from him. Finally, I acquiesced. I put my hands on his chest and let him transfer his soul to me. The merging was a success.

"Little did I know that Shamila had at some point walked into the room and was standing at the door, observing Pancha's dead body. I don't know how much she had seen. Without saying a word, she walked slowly towards his body. She then placed her head on his torso and cried profusely. I didn't think she saw anything. But I felt guilty, so I rushed out of the house instead of staying there to pacify her."

Guruji took a sip from the *lota* and continued, "But today at the funeral her emotions were suddenly triggered. It was as if watching her husband's funeral pyre brought her out of a coma. She told me that she had seen everything. She thought I had taken Pancha's soul by force. She slapped me and ran away."

"And you let her go?!" Uttarika bellowed.

"What else could I do?"

"You could have stopped her. What good are your powers if you do not use them at such times?"

"No, would I have been able to convince her? Maybe. But if I took over her body then surely, she would never trust me again. At least now there is a chance she may come back some day after she returns to her senses."

"But still. For her to go out in that condition. How will she give birth and raise her second child all alone? And how could she leave her first child behind?"

Guruji shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not even blame her." Uttarika continued, "How would she know that you did not take Pancha's soul by force? If I were in her place, I too would have made the same assumption. That poor thing is too afraid to come back for Gangadhar."

"It is not possible. I could not have taken Pancha's soul by force. There are only four places where such a thing would be possible."

"Where?"

"At the four *Mathas*[18] founded by Shri Adi Shankar himself- Govardhanmaṭha Pīṭhaṃ in the East, Sringeri Śārada Pīṭhaṃ in the South, Dvāraka Śārada Pīṭhaṃ in the West and Jyotirmaṭha Pīṭhaṃ in the North. Our mother had told Pancha and me about it. Even she did not know what was so special about these places. But when Pancha and I visited one of the *Mathas* even we felt that there is a certain aura to the place. When we were there, we felt that our soul-transfer powers had been amplified. It was no stretch to believe that we could extract anybody's soul from their body at such a place."

"Anybody's?"

"Yes, at any of the *Mathas*, an Amaruka can extract the soul of any other person, Amaruka or otherwise. Of course, he cannot *absorb* the soul of any other person. Soul merging is only possible when both souls belong to Amarukas. But the extraction can only be performed during the full-moon, when the moon is directly above that particular *Matha*."

Gangadhar had seen all that he needed. He scanned her entire memories to make sure that there was nothing else important. When he was done, he picked up a nearby knife and stabbed the body he was possessing in the stomach. After he watched Uttarika's bleeding body for a while, he returned back to his own body which was lying in the bushes outside the house. He stood up, dusted himself and walked away, while Uttarika screamed for help.

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[18] Hindu monastery.

Gangadhar threw the jute sack on the ground and let the young man crawl out from inside it. They were in a dark room with stone walls that had Sanskrit scriptures on it. It was night and there was nobody else around.

"Who are you? What do you want?" the young man asked frantically.

Gangadhar did not answer. There was no point in talking to a simpleton like him. He placed his hands in front of him, facing his palms towards the man whom he had kidnapped and gathered his faculties. In just a few seconds the man froze and fell flat on the ground. A glowing bluish-white fluid-like substance began to leak from his torso and make itself towards Gangadhar's palms. Once the entire substance was out of the man's body, Gangadhar held it in his palms and examined it. He took the substance near his chest and tried to gather his faculties again, but was unsuccessful. He could not absorb it. After a long attempt to absorb the soul, he pushed it back towards the man. The man gasped and opened his eyes. Gangadhar watched as he struggled for breath and wriggled like a fish that had been taken out of the water. The man's skin began to get back some of its colour.

Then Gangadhar had a change of mind. He once again lifted his hands and began extracting the soul. The man again became lifeless. This time, Gangadhar did not put it back or try to absorb it. He threw his hands upward and released the soul into the air. He watched as the fluid-like substance dispersed into the air. A soul that was created from apparently nothing went back into apparent nothingness.

***

It had been a three months since Gangadhar had killed Guruji and his wife. He began doubting whether he could ever obtain the soul splitting abilities. There were two tasks he had to complete in order to achieve the feat. One was to have children and train them in the soul-transfer technique and absorb their soul someday. The other was to find his estranged brother and absorb her or his soul. The former was obviously the easier of the two. But he had to find a wife. He had slept with women in the brothel before and even had raped a woman once, but the women in the brothel knew how to keep themselves from having children and the woman he had raped had killed herself just a few days after the incident.

Using his Late Guru's reference, he was able to fix a meeting with the *Sarpanch* of a village at Amravati. He had a young daughter who he wanted to marry off to someone from a reputed family. The news of Guruji's murder at the Sindhu River had reached the sarpanch but nobody knew who the culprit was. The sarpanch had enormous respect for Guruji and would surely not turn down Gangadhar.

He carried supplies necessary for the trip and made his way from Chhatar to Amravati. The trip would take only a little over a fortnight, but was quite dangerous. To reach Amravati, Gangadhar had to pass by dense forests which were inhabited by wild animals and thieves. Thieves weren't really a problem for Gangadhar, since he could use the soul-transfer technique on them. But animals were a huge threat. Guruji had told them a story that one of their ancestors had tried to enter the body of a crow once. The ancestor and the crow both died.

They say that when you worry about only one thing and nothing else, then that one thing will surely happen. The same happened to Gangadhar. One hot afternoon as he was walking in a forest, a wild

boar came out of nowhere and attacked him. The boar was digging into his abdomen when a nearby hunter heard Gangadhar's screams and rushed to the scene. The hunter threw a stone at the boar, and the boar fled immediately. Gangadhar lay there bleeding, while the hunter tried to tend to his wounds. Gangadhar knew that he would soon bleed to death and he closed his eyes to concentrate. After entering the hunter's body, Gangadhar took a minute to bid farewell to his own dead body, then he picked up his supplies and left.

It was moot marrying the *Sarpanch's* daughter. If he had to conceive a child while in someone else's body he might as well impregnate the hunter's wife.

***

Gangadhar lived his life through several people in the centuries to follow. He possessed the bodies of Indian kings and wealthy businessmen. He tried to conceive several children, but none of those children were ever able to perform the soul-transfer technique. As per the legend, the children of King Amaruka who were conceived when his body was possessed by the great Sanyasa carried the soul-transfer ability. By that same logic any children that he had while possessing the body of another man or woman ought to also be able to perform the soul-transfer technique. But it was not so. After repeated failed attempts and after killing almost a dozen of his own children in failed experiments at the four *Mathas*, Gangadhar tried to seek whether other Amarukas really exist. He traveled to different villages and cities in the Indian subcontinent. He did not succeed there. He tried to study other yogis and religious leaders. But none of them turned out to be Amarukas.

With the invention of the telephone and with a revolution in means of transport, Gangadhar took advantage of globalization and tried to put himself in positions where it is easier for him to find Amarukas, simultaneously while having fun. He went to Germany and took over the body of a dictator. Using his ability, he set up a special task force to research the occult. He travelled across the world occupying different world leaders, film stars and billionaires. In the 1990s, when he was briefly in the body of an ex-Prime Minister of India, a failed assignation attempt was made on his life. This was a wakeup call for him. He realized that chances of sudden death are exponentially more in world leaders, and he decided to only take over non-controversial persons. But he always made it a point to read the news. He looked out for news about people suddenly doing something uncharacteristic. Particularly, people who subsequently made statements that they had no memory or recollection of doing the uncharacteristic act. Such news was supremely rare, but he analyzed those rare cases carefully.

In this manner Gangadhar managed to live for almost five centuries. Finally, he found what he was waiting for. Multiple reports of people making confessions or acting weird and later claiming that they were not in their senses at the time. When the Vikram Munshi verdict was announced, he was there, casing the area for someone in proximity who was not conscious. Outside the courtroom he found a girl, supposedly sleeping on the shoulder of her friend. He immediately knew he had found what he was looking for. The girl had a strong aura and he felt a warmth emitting from her. But to make sure, he entered the body of the friend with brown eyes and sparkling amber hair and scanned her memories.

He learnt that the female Amaruka was named Aditi and that she along with the girl named Nura whose body he possessed were using her powers for furthering social causes. In Nura's memories he found the ideal candidate whom he could take over, in order to conveniently enter and exit Aditi's life. The very same day he tracked down her childhood friend Cyrus, with whom she was in touch and entered his body. He contacted her immediately and flew over to Delhi to meet her.

They met at a gastropub named '137, Hauz Khas'. There, he spiked her drink and when she was dizzy, he took her home, undressed her and laid her down on the bed. When she was in a drugged state, he entered her body for five seconds and scanned her memories. He had to go back into Cyrus' body immediately to prevent Cyrus from oddly reacting to a being in a bedroom with an undressed Aditi.

The next morning, he fed Aditi a concocted story of how she got drunk and displayed her powers to him.

There were many more startling memories such as planting a bomb at a café in Delhi and engaging a group of terrorists to take an entire school hostage. But Robin had seen enough…

30. *Their Reunion*

I travelled to Assam, where I found several practitioners of black magic. I tried to teach them the Universal Truth. However, some of them were not willing to listen.

Those who opposed my beliefs gathered together in a large circle around a fire and performed a black-magic ritual to drain my life-force till I died. They arranged for a messenger to check on me and update them about my deteriorating health.

The ritual took days and each day the messenger reported back to them that there was no change in my health. On the other hand, all the practitioners got sick. Some of them stopped the ritual in order to tend to themselves. A few of the more determinant ones kept at it, until they died in front of the fire. For some reason, the ritual had backfired and they were unknowingly draining their own life-force.

After the memories of Gangadhar, Robin also scanned the memories of the original Cyrus. Robin wasn't even sure how much time had passed since he inadvertently entered the body of Cyrus which was already possessed by some hundred-year-old man named Gangadhar.

'I have to concentrate and leave this body to warn Aditi.'

Robin began to focus. Slowly, he felt lighter and then heavier again. He had successfully switched bodies. He could feel a cold fabric against his cheek. He attempted to open his eyes, but was unable to. *'I probably re-entered Ranveer's body. He must still be under the influence of the anesthetic. Still, I have to keep trying'*. After numerous attempts,

Robin was able to open his eyes. But he was still unable to move his head. Through the corner of his eyes, he could see Cyrus's body lying on his right. But it was what was on his left that confounded him. On his left was an unconscious Ranveer, lying on the bed as well. *'Then who am I inside right now? And how come I couldn't scan the memories of the person I'm inside? And why can't I move?'*

Just as these questions popped up in Robin's mind, he found the answer right in front of him. It was a paw with golden fur. *'Oh my God! I'm inside Dante! No wonder I can't move; I don't know how to operate a dog's body.'* Robin tried and tried but could barely even flinch. *'At least I didn't have to go through his memories.'* Robin thought.

As Robin struggled, Gangadhar, who was possessing Cyrus' body, was regaining consciousness. He sat upright on the bed and cursorily examined the room. He was shocked to find Dante and Ranveer lying on the bed with him. He shook his head and slapped his cheeks to wake himself up completely. He continued to fixate on Ranveer, with a puzzled expression. He then pulled out his cellphone from his pocket and made a call.

"Hello, Aditi. Yeah, where are you? Yeah, I'm fine. What happened exactly?... Kiran? Okay. But are you fine? Where are you? With Kiran, why.... Okay. You know what, I'll be there in half an hour. Don't worry, I'm fine. By the way do you have any idea where Robin is? Ranveer's body is lying unconscious here, I'm not sure if Robin is in it or not... Yeah, you know what, we can't take risks. I can't carry the body out with me to the car without being seen. I'll just tie it up and leave a note. If it is Robin, he'll see it and wait for us to come back and if it isn't then we'll cross that bridge when we reach it."

Gangadhar cut the call, picked himself off the bed and grabbed the rope which Robin had pulled out from his backpack earlier. He then proceeded to tie up Ranveers hands and legs. After ensuring that Ranveer was securely tied to the chair, Gangadhar' eyes fell on the bottle and handkerchief lying next to Dante. He picked it up and placed it in his jacket pocket. All this while, Robin was trying to get up so that he could attack the perpetrator possessing Cyrus' body. But he was unable to do so. Gangadhar finger-combed his brunette hair, adjusted his clothes and left Robin with his invisible struggle.

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For Robin, hours passed. But they were Dog hours. In "real" time it was just over a few minutes. He tried to use the transferance to enter someone else's body, but the motel was empty since it was off-season, and there was no one in any of the nearby rooms. The only person in the vicinity was Ranveer and he was unconscious as well as tied up. It was better to be in a conscious Dante's body than in Ranveer's restrained unconscious one. So instead of trying the transferance he tried to move while still in Dante's body. Robin was able to stand, but immediately fell when he was trying to walk.

At that moment, Robin closed his eyes in defeat. When he opened them, he continued to see pitch darkness. But something was different. In the darkness, he could see that his body was emitting light. And he noticed he was no longer in Dante's body. It was his original body. The one he was born in and which he thought he lost forever. His body, which was suspended in the middle of that void, was emitting light. He looked in all directions, but he couldn't tell one direction from the other. There was only darkness all around. All of a sudden, a voice came from behind. He turned around and was

surprised to find a familiar looking old man just six feet away from him. The man had a white beard and was wearing a saffron robe. He sat in a lotus position. Robin wondered where he came from since he was certain he had turned 360 degrees at least twice but didn't see him before. The old sage was not sitting on anything in particular. The place did not have a floor. He was suspended in space just like Robin, such that he was at Robin's eye level. He wore an expression of serene content on his face, similar to the one most spiritual gurus' wear.

"Welcome." The man greeted him. Robin opened his mouth to say something, but the old man interrupted, "Obviously you want to know who I am. Your second question will be where you are right now, but do either of those questions matter? Do you want to dwell on the present or focus on the future?"

Robin was silenced. He was also frustrated. He began to loath the man's eternal smile, "Who are you?"

The man sighed, "I had hoped you had evolved beyond such questions, but perhaps I expected too much. I understand the world has become a very superficial place. If I had as many distractions as you do today, I don't think I would have been able to make it here."

Robin tried to look at the man more carefully "I know you, wait, you are Guru Parada!"

The man laughed. "Pancha, Parada, Aditi, Robin… These are just names. I am all. I am the One, I am Everything and also, I am also Nothing. While I am also you. Do you understand?"

Robin wasn't interested in ciphers. "What is this place?"

"If you didn't understand my last statement, you definitely won't be able to understand what this place is. Let us move on to the third question."

Robin thought for a while, "Why am I here?"

"Excellent! Now we are getting somewhere. You are here because this is the moment, I have chosen to present myself to you. Knowledge of the Universal Truth is a state of "Oneness". It is because of that Oneness that I am able to communicate with my descendants, such as you, nearly half a millenium after our physical body has perished. But listen carefully, for this will be the only instance during your life-time when we meet…"

Robin didn't understand much, but he did understand that the old man's next words were going to be of grave significance.

"Everything in life exists for a distinct purpose. And although it may not always be apparent, every purpose is the same – to continue life. Even those beings that take life, in the longer scheme of things, help in prolonging the existence of life itself. I am here to show you a glimpse of your distinct purpose." The man lifted his left hand straight out as though indicated towards something. Robin turned to his right and froze. Lying a few feet away from them was a girl lying in a pool of blood. On more careful inspection, he realized it was none other than Aditi. "Aditi!" Robin ran towards her, but she disappeared.

"That was just a glimpse of what is about to come. There is nothing you can do now, or even later for that matter… to change it." the man informed him.

"You mean Aditi is going to die? Is that what you are here to tell me? How does it happen? How do I stop it?!"

"I just told you – you cannot. I am not here to stop what you just saw. It will happen. I am here to prepare you for it."

"Wh – I don't understand. You are here to tell me she is going to die and there is nothing I can do about it?"

"Of course, there is something you can do about it. Like I said, you can prepare yourself for it and you can choose what to do after it has happened."

"No, I don't accept that-"

"Why would you want to save her? You are the one who does that to her."

Robin was confused. "No! That's a lie!" he shouted in rage, "I could never do that to her."

"Don't worry. You are not alone. There is another being who will share the burden with you. Together, you both will end the girl's life."

"I don't understand. Why? … Why do I have to do that?"

"Because that is your *distinct purpose*… The reason I am before you right now."

Robin tried to gather his thoughts "What if I choose not to?"

The man sighed again, "You will not have the luxury to make that choice. When the time comes, that choice will be made for you." Saying so, the man disappeared. Everything disappeared. Robin opened his eyes. He was back on the floor of the Bangalore motel. In front of him were his hairy paws. *'That was a weird dream.'* He thought to himself. *'No. It wasn't a dream. Or was it? Doesn't matter right now, Aditi is in trouble and I'm the only one who can help her.'* Robin took a deep breath and used his training with Aditi to sense the presence of

someone nearby on whom he could perform the transferance. Still, there was no one. He tried to remember his training sessions with Aditi. *'Focus, Robin. Focus. You may be a different person every day. You may be a dog. But that does not change things. You are still Robin Pinto. Nothing can change that.'* Robin stood on his four legs, and walked towards the door without hesitation. He tried to jump and reach the knob, but it was the round one and with his paws he struggled to get a proper grip of it, especially since he wasn't accustomed to Dante's body yet. He examined the room and tried to think of other possible solutions.

His eyes fell on the phone. *'Should I dial room service? Will they come if they hear a bark or don't hear a voice at all?'* Then his eyes fell on the sofa at the corner of the room, he saw Cyrus' laptop. '*Yes. That's what I can do.'* He ran towards the sofa and carefully placed his front paws on the top. Then he summoned all his strength and with his front paws pushing down as his hind legs lifted himself up, he managed to lift his body onto the sofa. The laptop was now right in front of him. He used his paws to hold it down while he tried to open it with his nose. It wasn't an easy task, but after a minute he managed to open it. The next part was relatively easy. He pressed on the power button to turn it on. The laptop took a long time to load. Once the 'Welcome screen' disappeared, he used his paw on the mouse pad to try and open the browser. This was again a difficult task.

When the browser opened, he made multiple attempts to type the name of the website in the address bar. Finally, it appeared in the autocomplete. He selected it and moved on to the login page. He was absolutely relieved to find that Cyrus' email address and password

was saved. He hit 'Enter', and reached the inbox. He hit "Compose" and began typing.

***

Gangadhar saw Aditi and Kiran at the side of the road, a little away from the lab. He stopped the car in front of them and pulled down the windows.

"How did it go?" he asked them.

"Amazing! I didn't have to use the transferance. Kiran just barged and in seconds incapacitated everyone. We destroyed everything connected to Fotura, and that too without killing anybody!"

"Sounds great."

Aditi turned to Kiran, "Thank you so much, once again. You made me realize something important. That I shouldn't rely on my abilities too much. I don't want my powers to be my crutches."

Kiran bowed slightly, accepting the gratitude, "I'll be on my way now." Saying this they turned and walked back to their car.

"Why don't you join us?" Aditi shouted with glistening eyes. This time it was Kiran who stopped in her tracks. "You have seen our work in the news. You know what we do… Join us."

Kiran didn't look behind. "I'll think about it, Ms. Mukherjee. Like I said before, I'm sure we'll meet again." they said and walked off.

Aditi sat in the passenger seat as she watched Kiran walk away.

"So, mission successful?" Gangadhar said as he started the car.

"Yup." She said with pride. "Hope you don't mind. I'm going to take a small nap. This mission was extremely stressful."

"Sure."

She handed over her phone to him. "In case Robin calls, just answer it."

Gangadhar placed the phone on the dashboard and continued driving. After a couple of minutes, Aditi's mobile buzzed. Gangadhar ignored it. One minute later it buzzed again. He took one look at Aditi's to ensure she was asleep. He sighed and then decided to check her phone. He picked it up and unlocked it, to find two email notifications. The emails were from Cyrus' account and both did not have any subject.

Gangadhar opened the first one received. It read "*SRAY AWAY FROM CYRUUS*". Gangadhar's heart skipped a beat. He quickly went back and opened the second email. "*CPME HOME Iam dsnte*".

He stared at the email. '*I've been made,*' he thought to himself. The phone in his hand buzzed again, but this time it wasn't emails, but a video call. He threw the mobile phone into his pocket and from the same pocket he pulled out the bottle of Robin's customized anesthetic.

***

Robin, who was still in Dante's body, wasn't sure whether Aditi read his mails. Ranveer made a muffled sound and turned over… *'He's waking up. Now's my chance.'* Robin thought as he jumped on top of Ranveer's body and chewed on the ropes tied around his limbs. It took some time, but once it was done, he bit down hard on his leg. Ranveer woke up screaming. Robin then closed his eyes and took deep breaths. When he opened his eyes, he was in Ranveer's body. Dante was trying to comprehend what had just happened. He saw Ranveer growling, but only for a second. He immediately stopped when he realized it

was Robin. As Robin rushed to the laptop, Dante followed him and sniffed his feet.

Robin opened the video conference software and called Aditi. There was no answer. He tried a second time, but to no avail. When all seemed lost, the door-bell rang. Robin rushed to open it hoping that it was Aditi. He swung the door open and was surprised to find another familiar face in front of him.

“Nura?!” he exclaimed.

31. *Their Showdown*

I had turned thirty-two years of age. I knew the end of my life in the material world was coming to a close. I was prepared for it. After all, every end was also a beginning.

One of my greatest fears during my youth was that my texts would be lost in time, and with them, my teachings of the Universal Truth. In order to prevent the same, I set up four monasteries in the North, South, East and West of India.

The monasteries themselves were merely structures made of stone. But they stood as institutions of the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism which I preached. Through them, my teachings of the Universal Truth would last for ages… or so I hoped.

"Nura?!" Robin exclaimed.

Nura stood at the door, with a meek expression on her face. She wore a white shirt and a black leather jacket over blue jeans. Her left sleeve was tied into a knot.

"Hi, Aditi?"

"No. It's Robin…uhh… Pumpernickel."

"Oh, Robin. Hi, can I come in?"

"Um… No. We have to go."

"Go?"

"Aditi's life is in danger. I'll explain on the way." Robin stepped out and closed the door behind him. Unbeknownst to him, Dante had also

stepped out along with him. The three of them ran down the stairs, with Robin taking the lead. "You got your car?"

"Yeah."

"I'll drive. Once we are in the car, I need you to keep calling Aditi's mobile." Robin told her. "Also, can you use the 'Find My Phone' app to track her?"

"Yes." Nura replied while wondering and Robin began driving. Ever since the night he lost his wife and child he had been terrified of getting behind a wheel.

"Then do it!"

***

Aditi was slapped across the face. She opened her eyes, to find Cyrus bending over her. He was wearing a serious expression on his face. She was lying on a cold hard ground made of stone. She was in a small room, which was of considerable height. She couldn't tell how high the ceiling went, but there were few feeble sun rays coming from a window behind her. The beam hit the wall opposite her, because of which she was able to make out that even the walls of the room were made of stone. There was a closed wooden door on her left.

"Cyrus? What happened?" she asked weakly. She tried to sit up straight, but realized that her hands were tied behind her.

"Don't worry, relax. It will all be over soon. But yes, you do have to be conscious. It won't work if you aren't."

"What won't work? Why are my hands tied? Can you please untie them?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

"What? Why not?"

Gangadhar, in Cyrus' body, refused to answer. Instead, he tried to look outside the window, as the sunlight got dimmer.

"Cyrus? Answer –" Aditi stopped short. She thought to herself '*Maybe this isn't Cyrus. Someone has entered Cyrus' body.*' She closed her eyes and began to breathe.

"There isn't any point." the man in Cyrus' body said, "Everyone in proximity is already dead."

Aditi discovered that he was right. She tried to enter Cyrus' body, but was unable to do so.

"Who are you?"

"Me? Don't you know? I'm Cyrus."

"I know you aren't. There are two souls inside you. Cyrus and yours. That's the reason why I can't enter your body. So just spit it out." She yelled.

"Ah yes. So, you figured it out. You can't enter a body which already has two souls. It gets over crowded, so you can never be let in. Robin can though. That too only if he has an escaping episode. His soul manages to force its way inside. I always suspected that he could. But today that theory was confirmed. It's nice to know."

"Robin? Is he still inside you?"

"Oh no, he is in Dante's body. Or at least he was. Who knows which body he must be in now?"

'Dante?' Aditi thought to herself. "Enough games. Tell me who you really are!"

"It's the truth, I'm Cyrus. Well, I may not be the Cyrus you knew from school. But I am the Cyrus that you have been dating for almost a year. I was the one who met you at '137, Hauz Khas'. I am the one who has been helping you on all your little adventures. I am also the one who has been sleeping with you. So, tell me, doesn't that make me more of a Cyrus to you then the original Cyrus?"

Aditi panicked, "No! It can't be. You're lying."

"Unfortunately, I'm not. In the last one year, you never met the original Cyrus. It was always me."

"It's not possible. You can't possess a body for so long!"

"Speak for yourself, darling. I very well can. I have spent even longer intervals in bodies over the last few centuries."

Aditi didn't know what to say. She felt violated, confused and angry at the same time. "You can call me Gangadhar." The man in Cyrus' body said.

"Gangadhar? Who are you? What do you want?"

"Excellent question." he remarked as he leaned towards her. "I want you, I mean- I want your soul. I already had your body and your heart, the soul is the only thing remaining, and frankly, it's the only thing I care about." He stood up straight again. "But we still have a few minutes left. There is a very short window during which we can do this." He looked out of the window, as if waiting for something.

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"It should be somewhere here." Nura said, as she checked her phone. She, Robin and Dante had gotten out of her car on a highway near Hassan which was between Bangalore and Mangalore. Nura's Find

My Phone app showed that the phone was somewhere on the road. Dante trailed off a bit ahead and began barking. Robin and Nura ran towards him and found him sniffing on Aditi's mobile phone. Nura picked it up and showed it to Robin. "She dropped her phone."

"No. Gangadhar threw it out the window when he realized that it was traceable."

"Are you serious!" Nura yelled. "You mean he's taken her hostage?"

"No doubt." Robin answered softly. He looked at the horizon where the moon had just begun to rise. "It's a full moon night. I know exactly where he has taken her."

"Where?"

"It's one hour from here." Robin said pensively as he rushed back to the car.

"Where is that?" Nura shouted as she followed him.

"Sringeri Śārada Pīṭhaṃ."

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"It is time." Gangadhar told Aditi, as he helped her sit up right. "Don't worry, this will be painless."

He placed both his palms a few inches in front of her torso. Aditi felt light. Her body began to vibrate uncontrollably, just as Robin's would during an episode. Her soul was being forcibly removed from her body. She tried to resist, but it was of no use. Aditi looked down at her torso as a bright bluish-white fluid-like substance came out from her torso. Aditi's skin began losing its colour. Her pupils retreated upward and had almost disappeared. Then there was a loud 'thud' sound. Aditi gasped as she regained consciousness. In front of her

were Nura and Robin who had just barged in the door and were standing over Gangadhar. Gangadhar, in Cyrus' body, was wriggling on the floor as Nura sank her Taser into his neck.

"Time to go." Robin told Aditi as he helped her stand up.

"Nura, stop!" Aditi yelled.

Nura obeyed. "You don't understand! This isn't really Cyrus."

"I know that! But if you kill him then the real Cyrus dies too."

Nura just stood there looking at an unconscious Gangadhar with utmost contempt. Clearly, she was in two minds.

"Let's just get out of here." Aditi instructed as Robin undid the knot tied around her hands.

"We can't just leave him here." Nura retorted.

"We have no choice."

"Let's at least tie him up."

"No, He can enter our bodies. Tying him isn't going to solve anything. We have to get out of here. That's the best option at the moment."

Nura and Robin both contemplated the suggestion and then nodded in agreement. They helped a weakened Aditi by propping her up from either side and walked out. They exited the *Matha*, where Aditi saw a couple of dead guards lying on the ground.

"Did he -" Aditi muttered.

"Yes." Robin replied before she could finish the question. "He killed all the guards and cut off the CCTV feed."

Aditi bent her head in shame.

A little away from the exit of the *Matha* was Nura's car. And sitting next to the car, was the loyal Dante, wagging his tail at the sight of the trio. Aditi was equally pleased to see him.

"Hold it!" came a voice from behind. The three of them turned around. It was Gangadhar, still in Cyrus' body, standing with his legs slightly apart, as though ready for a showdown. "Aditi, the moon is almost above us. Surrender, and I let your friends live."

Aditi threw him a look of disgust. "There are three of us and you clearly are alone. There's no way you are coming out on top."

"Don't make me laugh." He replied with a smirk, "One of you can't even perform a soul-transfer. And you two are newbies. I have been performing it for centuries. You cannot win."

Robin interjected, "What's the point of all that experience? We both know you can't enter my body. There are already two souls in here. You forget that I have seen your memories. I can see what you can do, and I know what you cannot."

The smirk on Gangadhar's face did not fade. "Maybe I can't enter your body, but even you can't enter mine. At least not by choice."

"Why are you doing this?" Aditi probed, "What is this all for?"

Gangadhar looked at the moon, "I suppose we have a few minutes" he took a deep breath, "Ever since my original body was destroyed, I have been moving from one body to another. Initially, I made sure I only took over the bodies of people that mattered. Renowned leaders, wealthy industrialists, celebrities and so on. I was content. I had abandoned the idea of merging a soul with another."

"Merging your soul?" Aditi was confused.

Robin explained "At the four primary *Mathas* a person with the ability to perform the transferance can absorb the soul of another person who has the ability to perform the transferance. Once they do that, they can split their souls and possess multiple people simultaneously."

Aditi was stupefied.

"Exactly. Like I said, I had abandoned the idea. But a few decades ago, I was in the body of one of India's Prime Ministers. There was a failed assassination attempt on the PM by a naval officer. Ever since then I have maintained a low profile. I have only possessed bodies of insignificant beings. That incident reawakened my resolve to be able to occupy multiple bodies at the same time. Even if one of the bodies I was occupying suffered a sudden death, I would live on. From that day I diligently followed the news, looking for anything that indicated the existence of another Amaruka."

"Amaruka?" Aditi was again puzzled.

"Someone with the ability to perform the transferance." Robin clarified. There was no time to go into the history of sages and kings.

"I came across a few leads, but they didn't lead anywhere. Then I heard news about officers who issued warrants against Vikram Munshi, and later claimed that they had no memory of it. I knew I had found the next Amaruka. And as Robin already knows, I tracked you down. I noticed that you were just a novice in using your abilities. But the way soul merging works is that the more proficient you were at the "transferance" prior to the merging, the more the number of bodies I could possess simultaneously. Thus, I needed to make sure you were honing your skills. I needed to nudge you in the right direction and I also needed to keep an eye on you to make sure you

didn't recklessly get yourself killed. I did some research and found out about Cyrus. He was the perfect candidate. Using him, I was able to enter and exit your life as per my convenience. I was also able to influence your decisions, but then something unexpected happened…"

Aditi had a realization, "That's why your voice was different over the phone sometimes. You were in different bodies…"

"Exactly. My plan was proceeding smoothly but this cuckold came out of nowhere and presented me with a difficulty." Gangadhar nodded towards Roin. "I had to maintain a distance. If he had an escaping episode while I was around, he could enter me and my plan would be interrupted. That's why I had to get rid of him. I also thought it would be a good opportunity to get rid of Nura as well, so that I would be the only one who could influence your decisions. I planted the bombs at Caprisa Café and I made sure you, Aditi, were on a date with me when I hit the detonator, so that I could ensure you weren't anywhere near the bomb and also so that I had a perfect alibi. But alas, the bomb was found by another patron, and Robin didn't even make it there in time. I didn't even manage to kill you, Nura."

Aditi and Nura stood there in shock.

"You? It was you?!" Nura yelled.

"Yes, it was. And you must also have guessed by now that I was the terrorist who briefly claimed to be your father. The entire attack on St. Augustus High School was orchestrated by me, to avoid you meeting Cyrus' parents. An unexpected bonus was that it ended up driving Nura away."

"Wait a minute." Aditi interjected, "You took an entire school hostage just to avoid me meeting Cyrus' parents?"

"Yes. You see, I told Cyrus' parents that he was in Delhi permanently. Each time I told you I was going back to Mumbai, I lied. In reality I was just running my own errands. I couldn't let his parents and you get talking and risk you finding out the inconsistencies in my statements. In fact, once I realized his mother and you were chatting on social media, I had resolved to get both his parents killed. But I never got the time to get around to it… Anyways, we are running out of time. You'll learn everything else once our merger is complete."

"You are sick!" Aditi yelled, "You've killed countless number of people just so that you could continue living forever!"

"Shut up, Aditi! You, hypocrite!" Gangadhar yelled back. "How is my killing people different from you doing it?"

"That's different!" Nura said assertively, "Aditi didn't have a choice but to kill the Nine, they were about to kill a little girl who -"

"Oh, but I'm not talking about the Nine. I'm talking about those thugs who used to loiter close your house in Gurugram…Yes, Aditi, I saw that!…" Aditi winced as Nura turned to her with an expression of utmost horror "…This world is flawed… I should know, I'm exactly four hundred and seventy-three years old! I have seen more of it than all of you collectively. The human race demands supervision. Why do you think we Amarukas exist? Why were we given these gifts? You know the reason as well as I do. It is so that we could govern. Isn't that what you all have been doing? Controlling judges, parliament members and so many others… Killing people! You all have spent the last couple of years doing the exact same thing I have been doing for

centuries. Your only objection, Aditi, is that *you* don't want to merge with *me*. If *you* could absorb *my* soul, you would do it without a seconds' thought. It's just primitive self-preservation…And that's what disgusts me. The lies you tell yourselves. Among all the shortcomings you humans have, the only one I cannot tolerate is self-delusion."

Robin retorted, "You are the one in self-delusion. Don't pretend as if you are doing this for anyone but yourself. I have scanned your memories. I know your intentions. You are after self-preservation yourself…And it's unfair to the person's whose bodies you occupy for so long periods. Cyrus didn't do anything wrong, yet you've stolen more than a year of his life!"

"Unfair?! You want to talk to me about unfair?! You saw what happened to Vimal. Was that fair? My uncle made him supress his powers, and he died because of it. Its time we Amarukas lived up to our full potential. And soul-merging is the next stage of our evolution." Gangadhar turned to look at which was about to descend completely. On the opposite side a slight glow of light could be seen. "It's almost dawn. Time for us to get back, Aditi."

Taking advantage of the fact that Gangadhar's eyes were no longer on them, Robin ran towards him and landed a blow to his face. Robin hoped the punch would knock him unconscious. But his plan failed. Cyrus' body was bulky and fit, and Ranveer's body couldn't match. Gangadhar punched him back and Robin fell to the ground instantly.

Dante leapt on Gangadhar and bit his hand. Gangadhar didn't resist. He simply closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He collapsed on the ground. Aditi and Robin both looked at each other to see whose body

he had entered. Nura pulled out a pair of pointed tip scissors from her purse and held it up against her neck.

"Make any false move and I stab her." He said, which confirmed Robin and Aditi's suspicions that Gangadhar had entered Nura's body. Dante stopped biting on Cyrus hand.

"If you kill her, you'll die too!" Robin yelled.

"No. If I stab her in the neck, I will have plenty of time to enter another body, before she bleeds to death, don't worry about me."

Robin bent his head and gave Aditi a non-verbal message of '*I'm sorry. But there is no other choice.'* Aditi nodded. "Okay. Let's go. I'll do as you say."

"Great. Follow me, but from a distance."

Gangadhar, now in Nura's body, walked back to the *Matha*, all the while holding the scissor up to Nura's neck. He crossed over Cyrus' body which was moving about feebly. Aditi followed him. Dante watched on and growled.

"Dante, no!" Robin yelled, before Dante would attack them. Dante obeyed the order but continued to growl. Robin and Dante both watched helplessly as Aditi and Gangadhar disappeared into the *Matha*.

Robin got a sickening feeling. But it was not caused by the events that just transpired. He was having an episode. *'Not now'* he thought to himself. *'I had entered Ranveer's body before. That's why it's already built a resistance against my soul and I'm being pushed out so early. How many times can I possibly keep making these kinds of miscalculations!'* At that very moment, Cyrus turned to him and asked, "Who are you?"

'This is the first time the real Cyrus has ever spoken to me' Robin thought, but he didn't have time to muse over it. "I'm sorry about this." he told Cyrus as he crawled towards him and touched his hand. For the second time in the last twelve hours, Robin entered Cyrus' body. Before Ranveer could say anything, Robin pulled out the bottle and handkerchief from Cyrus' jacket and quickly poured his anesthetic onto the handkerchief before pressing it against Ranveer's mouth. Ranveer fell to the ground.

'What is going on?' Dante thought to himself.

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"Lie down." Gangadhar instructed Aditi, as he continued to hold up the scissors against the side of Nura's neck. Aditi complied and closed her eyes. She used her last moments to think of a small prayer in which she expressed gratitude for her parents and her friends. She thought about whether she had any regrets, but only two came to mind – one was that she was notable to help Robin to permanently get a body, and the other was that she was unable to recognize Dhwani's depression and save her on time.

Amidst those thoughts, Aditi wondered why it took Gangadhar so long to begin the process of absorbing her soul. She opened her eyes and saw an expression of confusion on his face. At that moment she realized that since Gangadhar was in Nura's body, he only had one hand, which happened to be occupied in holding the scissors.

'This is my chance' Aditi thought. She sat up right and placed her hands facing his torso. She focused on trying to identify and absorb Gangadhar's soul. He, in turn, threw down the scissors and began absorbing her soul. A small amount of bright fluid emitted out of both

of them. Each of them was unable to pull out the other person's soul, since their own soul was also being pulled out, thereby weakening them. But the apparent stalemate lasted no more than a few seconds. Centuries of experience had made Gangadhar more proficient in the transferance. Gangadhar managed to resist the soul absorption and the fluid emerging from his torso began to retract. An evil smile appeared on his face as the colour appeared back on his face for a moment. But only for a moment.

Gangadhar stopped absorbing Aditi's soul to turn back, and saw Cyrus behind him absorbing his soul from behind. Aditi didn't understand what was going on, but she took advantage of the opportunity and continued absorbing Gangadhar's soul. He yelled uncontrollably as his soul was being absorbed from both sides. In a matter of seconds, Nura's body collapsed on the floor and the other two each had orbs of the bright bluish-white plasma in their hands. They panted heavily as their eyes met.

"Cyrus?" Aditi asked.

"No. It's Robin. Pumpernickel."

"Oh, of course." They both went back to staring at the orbs in their hands. "One is Gangadhar's and the other is Nura's."

"Which do you think is which?"

"The one you are holding is Nura's and the one I'm holding is Gangadhar's."

"How do you know for sure?"

"Can't you sense it?"

Robin closed his eyes. He was able to sense the energy emitting from both souls. Both felt familiar. For reasons even he did not understand, he was able to identify the one in his hands as Nura's and the one in Aditi's hands as Gangadhar's. "You are right." He said as he opened his eyes. He lowered his hands and placed the orb of light on Nura's body. The light was immediately absorbed and Nura gasped as she awoke. She looked around and saw Cyrus holding her by her shoulders while Aditi was holding an orb of light.

"What the – What's going on?"

"It's me- Robin. We won. Aditi extracted Gangadhar's soul."

Nura sighed in relief as she took in this information. Aditi's eyes were fixated on the soul in her hands.

"You can let that go." Robin informed her. "If you raise your hands up and let it go upwards, it will be released. I've seen him do it when I scanned his memories."

Aditi didn't respond. Nura called her name, "Adi?"

"What if I don't let it go?" Aditi muttered softly as she continued to stare at the soul. "What if I absorb it? I could achieve the immortality Gangadhar spoke of."

"You can't." Nura protested, "If you did that, how are you any different from him?"

"The difference would be that I didn't kill anyone to achieve the soul splitting ability. Think of all the good I could do. We wouldn't be confined to using the transferance to change things only in India. We could expand our operations to every corner of the world. I could fix problems in different places at the same time."

"Is it worth the price?" Nura questioned. "Robin told me that soul binding was permanent. Could you deface your own soul that way?"

"A small price to pay. Isn't it worth compromising my soul for seeking eternal peace? To have a world with no war, where everyone receives justice. I could create a paradise, and do you want me to let that chance go?"

"This is about Dhwani, isn't it?" Nura asked somberly, which mildly startled Aditi, "I saw your post on Facebook. It's tragic, the way she died. But there's nothing you could have done. You think that by being in different places at once, Dhwani's predicament could have caught your attention and you could have spare time to help her. But no matter how many people's bodies you are possessing, you could still neglect such a case."

"You don't know that!"

Nura didn't respond. Aditi moved Gangadhar's soul towards her, but froze mid-way. She hesitated. She noticed that Robin was wearing an expression of disappointment.

"You are unusually quiet about this." Aditi noted.

Robin told her what was on his mind, "I see the logic in what you are saying. If I were in your place, maybe I would have decided the same. But ask yourself, are you really doing this because of the amount of good you can do, or is it simply because you want to achieve immortality? Be true to yourself and everything will be okay."

Aditi contemplated Robin's words as her eyes turned from him to the orb of light in her hands. Her eyes watered as she shook her head. "If I let this chance go, that will be it. The opportunity will never come again."

Robin replied softly, "Don't worry about that. I too am what Gangadhar referred to as an 'Amaruka'. If you ever decide that you want to absorb a soul for the right reasons, I will gladly volunteer mine."

Aditi's head quickly turned to Robin. She took a deep breath and lifted her arms up. While Aditi and Robin looked each other in the eyes, Nura watched as the glowing orb raised up and went through the ceiling of the temple. Unbeknownst to any of them, a crow had flown across the *Matha*'s dome just as soon as Gangadhar's soul penetrated through it.

"No." Aditi told Robin, "I will get you into a body permanently. You will get to live a normal life and when the time comes you will die and join your family. I swear this to you." They embraced each other. When they let each other go, they both turned to Nura, who had a pair of scissors held tightly in her hand.

"Nura!?" Robin yelled.

Nura looked at them both frantically, "How do I know neither of you is Gangadhar?"

Robin and Aditi glanced at each other with the sudden realization that the other could be Gangadhar. When they weren't certain, it was more than reasonable for Nura to think it. She was the one to lose the most because of Gangadhar.

Robin closed his eyes and took a deep breath, which alarmed Nura. Robin sensed the warmth being emitted from Aditi. If the meditative state could be equated to the real world, he was lakeside in an ever-green forest filled with life. He opened his eyes and serenely asserted, "It is Aditi. I can sense it."

Aditi nodded. She in turn tried to sense Robin's presence with her eyes closed. When she opened them she remarked "And that is really Robin."

Nura let out a long sigh, then dropped the scissors and made her way out. "Let's go." She told the other two, "I'm driving."

The other two slowly followed behind her.

"Hey" Robin whispered to Aditi, "Could you really sense me?"

Aditi glanced ahead to make sure Nura wasn't listening and whispered back, "To be honest, no. But I had to bluff to calm her down."

Robin, who was still in Cyrus' body, got into Nura's car along with Nura, Aditi, Dante and drove away quickly, leaving Ranveer's unconscious body on the grounds of the *Matha*. In all probability, he would be accused of killing the guards and would face jail time for it. They couldn't find Cyrus' Mercedes anywhere around, or else they would have disposed of it so that it couldn't be traced back to the real Cyrus.

32. *Their New Lives*

The astrologers had said that I would die at ages eight, sixteen or thirty-two. I was fortunate to have lived for thirty-two years. When my end was coming near, I told my disciples that I desired to go for a walk alone. I bade them farewell and walked away behind the Kedarnath temple. Little did my disciples know the permanent nature of my farewell.

I sensed a pull coming from the north, and so I walked in that direction. I began feeling light in the head. A crow was cawing in the vicinity. There weren't many crows in the region, especially during the winter.

Hours later, my disciples set out to look for me. But they could not find me. I had moved on. My existence did not end, but it had permanently changed its form.

"Ahh…" Robin placed his cup of coffee back on the table. Robin, still in Cyrus' body, was with the others at a *dhaba* at the outskirts of Mumbai. They had been in Nura's car for the last twelve hours, during which they only stopped twice to use a restroom, fill up the tank, and have a snack. They still had a two-hour drive ahead of them. After they paid the bill, they went back to the car. Nura's handicapped hand did not diminish her driving skills. Nura had driven most of the way. Since the car was an automatic, her driving skills were unaffected by her handicap. But it was now Robin's turn to drive.

Nura decided she would fly back to Bangalore after ensuring that Aditi and Robin reached home safe and sound. She sat next to Robin. Aditi sat with Dante in the back, giving her room to lie down after the

tiresome ordeal. It was a long drive but the group had plenty to talk about. Robin told Aditi everything that he had seen in Gangadhar's memories. He also told her how he was able to enter Dante's body, which surprised the others. Aditi confessed to Nura about what she had done to the rowdy biker gang and expressed her remorse over it. She also enumerated reasons why she didn't agree with the theory that they were descendants of King Amaruka, and just like before, they had an old-fashioned deliberation over the nature of a soul. After the first few hours of the trip, they were done with the serious discussions. After that, there was only awkward silence. They were an hour away from home when Robin decided to break the tension.

"You know Aditi, entering a dog's body might sound fun, but you don't want memories of drinking from the toilet." Robin lied. He had never scanned Dante's memories. But Aditi and Nura burst out laughing. They let out more laughs than the joke deserved. But they could not help themselves. But after the laughter was done, there was silence again. This time it was Aditi who broke it.

"I'm sorry, Nura," she said in a serious tone. "What I said that day when I dropped you off at the airport. I don't know what I was thinking. It was insensitive of me."

"Don't sweat it." Nura half-turned back towards her right. She lifted her hand over the seat to hold Aditi's. Aditi extended her own hand to hold Nura's hand.

"I don't want to ruin the moment." Robin butted in, "But what was it that you said that caused such a big fight between you two?"

"Nothing!" Nura replied immediately. The two girls looked at each other's reflection in the rear view mirror and gave each other a smile.

Aditi sighed, “Guys, we need to address the elephant in the room. What do we do with Cyrus? When he regains consciousness, how do we explain where the last eighteen months of his life have gone?”

“I was thinking about it.” Nura confessed, “Cyrus’ family already thinks he was dating you. So it’s not like we could tell Cyrus he was in a coma for the last year and a half. There are only two things that I can think of – First option is that we pretend as if nothing happened and when Cyrus wakes up we act as if he is having amnesia after being hit in the head. It is a far-fetched option and definitely one of the cruelest one’s.”

“No.” Aditi replied, “Not only is that cruel to him, but I can’t pretend that I was dating him any longer…” Aditi shivered as a chill went down her spine, “He may be a great guy in reality but the truth is I have absolutely no idea who he really is. Also, each time I see him I can only think of Gangadhar and how he used me physically and otherwise. No. Sorry, I can’t do that.”

“The second option,” Nura added quickly before Aditi could dwell any more on those dispiriting thoughts, “is that we tell him the truth. About your abilities, about the last year and a half and even about Gangadhar.”

Robin and Nura waited for Aditi’s response. After a lot of thinking she finally decided, “That’s the way to go. Robin and you will tell him everything.”

“Robin and me? You won’t join us?”

“No. I’m not coming to the motel. I want you to drop me at your house at Sakina Manzil, Robin. Then you guys go ahead to the

Sunflower Motel and have the discussion with Cyrus over there, after freshening up of course. We've all had a long day."

"Where will you go?" Robin inquired.

Aditi sighed, "After I take a shower and pack some essential supplies, I'll go for a walk, for a few months… maybe even a bit longer." Robin and Nura both half—turned back. Aditi continued "I was thinking about it for some time and recent events have confirmed that it's something I need to do. I need to go on a pilgrimage. Visit a few spiritually significant places, be closer to nature and try to learn more about my abilities. For a long time, I've been feeling a pull coming from the north, as if something is summoning me. I don't know what it is, but I want to follow it and find out. I need to dig deeper not only into my abilities but also myself. What's the point of having these abilities if I couldn't even help someone like Dhwani? I need to balance being a soul-transferor as well as a human being."

"Okay," Nura tried to take in the entire information, "But do you really need to walk from one place to another? We have enough funds in the offshore accounts. You can travel in a plane."

"Do you have access to those accounts?" Robin was surprised, "I thought only Cyrus did."

"Please!" Nura replied smugly, "So what say, Aditi? Convert your pilgrimage on foot to one by plane?"

Aditi looked out the window, "It won't be the same." she said simply as she patted Dante with one hand.

"Do you have to leave immediately? At least wait till we talk to Cyrus." Robin tried to persuade her.

"I can't." Aditi asserted while still staring out the window.

Seeing that her mind was made up, Robin and Nura decided not to try and talk her out of it. “Sure, will you survive without your books?” Nura quipped.

“I’ll carry a Kindle with me.” Aditi smirked, “The Sanyasa’s didn’t carry any electronics with them on pilgrimages because they didn’t have any back then. But this is my pilgrimage. I’ll do it on my terms.”

Finally, they reached Sakina Manzil. All of them got out of the car. Robin and Nura hugged Aditi and Aditi hugged Dante.

‘Should I tell her about my vision when I was in Dante’s body?’ Robin thought to himself, *‘No. It was just a dream. I do not want to add to her stress. I better forget about it myself.’*

“I don’t want to shift back to Bangalore.” Nura revealed much to the surprise of the other two “If Robin is cool with it, I’d like to stay here and keep carrying on missions with him. I also want to bring Navya to Mumbai and take care of her as my ward.”

Robin beamed and nodded.

Aditi watched as Robin and Nura made googly eyes at each other. “I hope you both make it.” she teased, which caused both of them to blush. Nura glared at her while Robin gave a look of a deer in headlights.

“Wow. I’m sure you both can’t wait for me to leave. Okay, then…”

“I’ll miss you.” Nura said, “We both will. Come back as soon as you can.”

“Of course, I will. Your operation won’t last long without me.” Aditi quipped. “Start by solving the “Ash Disappearances” which has been coming in the news for the last week. It seems interesting. Multiple people disappearing and a pile of ash remaining at places they were

last seen. Sounds like something out of a fantasy fiction novel. I tried figuring it out, but couldn't get any leads. But I think it could be right up your alley."

"We'll get on it." Robin replied, "We'll get on all of them."

"And tell my parents I decided to take a year off. I'll try to call them over the phone, whenever I get the chance.

"Will do." Nura assured her.

Aditi waived as she turned to walk into the gate. Mishra greeted the owner of apartment C-201 of Sakina Manzil, as she went in. Robin and Nura got back into the car. This time Robin was the one who was in the driver's seat. Nura extended her hand to reach Robin's hand which was on the transmission. Robin turned to her and they both gave each other a gentle smile. Robin started the engine and they drove off to the Sunflower Motel.

THE END

Review us

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